Naruto Rend

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Sacrifice doesn't always mean the fighting is over. Stopping one great evil doesn't mean others won't be revealed. Being heroes doesn't mean they won't lose. Like mighty rivers shaping the rocks they carry, salvation and damnation sculpt life, death, and rend the soul. Part II of Naruto Asunder.

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Naruto Rend

Chapter 1:

"You're not him either."

Naruto Uzumaki cracked a bleary eye, trying to locate the source of the strange voice. A rotund figure skipped away from him through the blackness. He could barely make out the large off-white coat that fell below its knees. Swallowing the dryness in his mouth as his vision focused, Naruto failed to make anything but a faint gasp come out.

The figure turned, a white smile of dagger shaped teeth consumed most of a long face as menacing yellow eyes glared wickedly from behind a pair of thin wired glasses. The little skin showing was smooth and grayish, highlighting the long pointed ears pressed out by the rim of a tall hat.

"Good evening." The creature's grin never stopped, nor did the clenched teeth separate, leaving the voice slightly muffled. "How sad it is for you to be up so early my little friend."

Naruto attempted to question the strange being, but the words wouldn't come out. He struggled to sit up, but not a single muscle moved. What was going on? Did he finish Madara? Oh hell, what if the makeshift technique teleported instead of killed?

"It is so odd for you to be up so soon; most spirits take years to awaken." The creature gave a slushy sounding laugh. "The residents of your world continue to impress."

Naruto delved down into himself. Where was his chakra? If he could pull even a tiny amount out, he'd be back on his feet. It should be so simple to find, so why was there only emptiness where it usually sat?

"Things have been so busy since someone tore the gate down on your side. Those creatures and the three before were interesting - as are you three."

Three?

Naruto followed the shift in the creature's gaze. Stretched out on their backs, Hinata and Lee slept so still he worried they were dead. Well, if the thing told the truth, they were dead, but so was he. He'd shake his head in confusion if his body would just respond.

"But none of you are that Sage." The creature spun around on its toes. "Now I can continue my work in peace but what to do with you three?"

Naruto's throat tightened as the creature moved over to Lee, paused, then crouched over Hinata.

"Ooh, she is such a beautiful creature." Naruto could have sworn the thing added a heart at the end of its statement. "Maybe, I should spare her from the void."

Naruto pulled harder on his missing chakra as the creature's gloved hand reached down for Hinata's cheek. His muscles refused to budge no matter how hard he willed them to.

Damn it move! He struggled more frantically. *Move!*

Out across the sea of dark, three bright stars blinked into existence. The thing looked up as the lights raced toward them.

"Oh dear." It hopped back as the beams engulfed each of the ninja. "I'm afraid this won't do."

The creature stretched out a hand encased in malevolent energy and shoved Naruto further into the void.

What could he do?

His left arm, charred down to the bone, hung limply by his side as his sword lay buried in the ground miles away. Such a thing by itself did not leave him overpowered, but being drastically outnumbered did. And that man hadn't made a move yet. He simply stood above him, calculating several moves in advance as honey brown eyes shined mirthfully.

Ignoring the gloating man, he cast his wrinkled eyes to the destroyed city around them. The broken remains of his army unceremoniously left where they dropped, as the strongest were held at blade point, barely breathing and in no condition to even stand.

The honey eyed man pulled out a small dark orb from his vest and held it out in his palm.

"You performed admirably, Genryusai-dono. Thanks to your arrival, I now have plenty of energy to fuel my Hogyoku." The man smiled arrogantly. "Your names will be etched on the throne of God in remembrance of your sacrifices."

The orb shimmered and the world seemed to shift, before a dark purple light engulfed everything.

Simulation Failure!

The red caricatures flashed as the scene faded away to black. An audible hiss arose as the front of the chamber slowly opened. Genryusai Yamamoto placed his long calloused fingers against his face and attempted to rub the fatigue away. This was the twelfth simulation they had run in the past thirty-two hours. One immediately after the other and all of them failures.

"This is not working Mayuri Kurotsuchi." He growled out, his tone rougher than its normally plain gruff sound. "There have been over three hundred simulations in the past month and nothing has provided answers."

The hunched over doctor came around from the side.

"I lack the necessary data to accurately produce a suitable situation. We have already logged over forty thousand variables with two hundred thousand more in development. Get me useful data on Aizen and I would be more than happy to provide a flawless simulation."

Yamamoto let a hint of his power leak out from its tightly controlled veil.

"There is no time for excuses." The old man stood and reached for the gnarled cane resting on the outside of the chamber. "Aizen's attack could possibly arrive days, even months earlier than expected. You have what is available. Make use of it."

Spinning on his heal, he strode out as his white torso length beard swayed with each step. Holding up his free hand, a black glittering butterfly floated down and gently landed in his palm.

"Attention all Gotei 13 Captains. The Hueco Mundo rescue mission is to be cancelled immediately. Report to First Division Headquarters in three hours, no exceptions."

He dismissed the little creature with a gentle wave, helping the air catch under its wings. The grip on his cane tightened as he walked out into the night sky and stood upon the science division balcony. Inhaling the fresh air deeply, his red eyes scanned the horizon and all below. The pearl white facings of the city's many buildings stood proudly as if nothing could ever topple their grandeur.

He kneaded out a knot tightening in his opposite shoulder.

It was subtle, but every year the weight on his shoulders grew a little heavier - the threats a little more difficult to surmount. What they were up against now was not new, nor would it be the last crisis. There was always going to be hollow, rogue shinigami, or some other force bent on destroying Seireitei or harming innocent souls.

Yet at the heart of it, Aizen raised more concern. There existed no reason to justify such a thing. He was skilled at deception, dangerously intelligent, and had hidden all the cards.

It wasn't anything new. Still, the anxiety remained.

The primary concern stemmed from the issue that Aizen had an unknown force, could no doubt duplicate and enhance it at will, and was fully aware of theirs.

The latter was something in need of immediate change.

This place smelled funny. It was too clean and bland, almost like scent in itself. Even worse, they covered up another scent, something familiar.

Blood.

Clear blue eyes opened to a dusky sky. It looked painted on, fake, just like the air. He knew the false sky hid something. What that something was had to be important because his heart cried out for it, and a big part of him wanted to get up and tear down every last inch of it, despite the feeling it held something terrible back.

"So you finally decided to get up, huh?"

The world shifted around him so he stood on a barren dirt field. It lacked the stale scent of dust, just more blandness. A man appeared out of the wind, his nearly glowing red eyes causing a nervous shiver down Naruto's back.

"Who are you?" Naruto clenched and unclenched his hands into fists.

"Me? I'm your knew master, kid." Naruto went to bite back a retort but the man's predatory grin froze him in his tracks. "You better get used to the fact quick."

"What do you mean, you're my new master?"

"Cause you're going to be my new sword, Naruto."

"Huh?"

While not the most intelligent of responses, it definitely summarized his entire mind frame. This odd place, and the unsettling man, confused him… as did the name. Naruto, he knew it was his name, or at least, it felt like it was. He lacked the feeling of any bond to it though. It lacked the significance name's carry. Memories and weight, the definition of who he was remained absent.

It felt like his name should mean something. Like the painted sky, the name seemed to hide so much potency behind it.

"What do you mean, huh?" The red eyed man took a step closer, kicking his chin up and glaring down at him. "Don't tell me your memories haven't kicked back in yet."

"Yeah." Naruto scratched the back of his head with a nervous grin. "Sorry, everything's kind of a blank."

The man stomped up and picked him up by the collar of his plain white shirt using only one hand, the raven colored hair billowing out around the man's shoulders as anger rolled off him.

"I haven't sat around in this damn place for three hundred years for you not to remember who you are!"

Clenching his teeth, the words bubbled up in Naruto's chest and he grabbed the man's wrist.

"What the hell does it matter to you if I remember who I am?"

"Because your power is attached to who you are, and if you can't access it we can't get out of here because your body won't wake up."

Naruto blinked.

"Huh?"

The man tossed him back with a frustrated sigh and folded his arms across his chest as Naruto struggled to stay on his feet. Dressed in silken black, the baggy robe like garment hid what had to be powerful muscles. For whatever reason, Naruto knew most people couldn't make him stumble.

"Alright punk, let's go over the basics. I'll talk. You shut up and listen, got it?"

Naruto frowned but slowly nodded.

"Your name is Naruto Uzumaki, and you're dead."

"Bu-."

"Shut up." Naruto yelped as the man punched the top of his head. "Right now, you and I are spirits who have formed this mindscape to talk to each other. It's our common ground. Your body is nothing more than energy waiting to reform around a spirit and form a soul."

Naruto rubbed his head and stuck out his bottom lip in a pout as the man continued.

"Only one of us can claim that body and become physical souls. The other one will be tied to the soul's zanpakuto."

"Zanpaku- what?"

"A sword derived from a person's soul, or in our case, a sword binding our two individual souls. One of us takes the body; the other

gets stuffed into the sword and gives up his power to the wielder." The man flashed a feral grin as a murderous aura radiated off of him. "And punk, I ain't sitting tight and giving my power to some snot nosed brat."

Give me back my precious research you brat!

You brat, have some respect for your sensei!

Brat, what makes you think you have what it takes to be Hokage?

Naruto's eyes lit up as the image of a smiling man with long silver hair flashed through his mind. He knew this man. He knew how important he was to him.

Good job, Naruto.

Nice gaki.

Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes as bittersweet warmth filled his heart.

Look Ero-Sensei, I did it! I got the Shunshin!

And how many trees did you take out in the process?

"Are you actually crying, punk?"

Naruto wiped his eyes on his bare forearm and stood to his full height as countless images streamed through his thoughts. Jiraiya, even now, the old pervert was helping him. His sky blue eyes locked on to the smoldering red of the much taller man. Plastering a grin on his face, Naruto pointed his finger defiantly.

"I don't know who the hell you think you are, but that body belongs to me, Naruto Uzumaki, the greatest ninja to ever come out of Konoha!"

Killing intent swept out and kicked up dust as the man's eyes narrowed.

"You want to repeat that death wish?"

"I sure as hell don't know what's going on, but if I'm here, Hinata and Lee have to be somewhere close by. And if that creepy ball shaped thing has them, I don't have time to waste on you!"

Light blue energy swirled up around him, pushing back the man's rage and sweeping out across the ground. It felt different than chakra - purer, and moved through his entire body instead of a series of pathways. But the oddest part was that there was nothing to mix. There were no physical or spiritual energies; it was just one mass of power.

Crossing his fingers in front of his chest, a grin grew as the man's lips dipped into a tight frown.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu."

A brief gust of wind blew between them, the energy dying and leaving them in a staring contest.

"Did you just try and attack me?"

Naruto's grin became more nervous.

Why the hell hadn't it worked? He made the hand seal, although none of the energy had moved with it. That didn't make any sense though, seals were supposed to direct the chakra through muscle memory so a ninja only needed to worry about the sequence, not moving the energy itself. A hand seal had a defined balance of chakra volume and movement, things that didn't change with a jutsu. It was why they were drilled constantly in the academy, or why a completely new hand seal needed to be created for a technique outside of the basic elements. It was why they weren't always

necessary after the body remembered how to form a technique from countless repetition.

When he was… alive, he could form one or two clones without a seal. Was it possible for him to do it now? By only having a single energy in the body, it should be easier. Or maybe it would be better if he tried to retrain his body to shape the energy freely.

"A good dog knows better than to bite his master's hand." A katana, nearly five feet long with a golden hilt materialized in the man's hand as his face twisted up into a scowl. "Now, be a good boy and play dead."

The man lunged at him so fast Naruto barely dove to the side, the tip of the lengthy katana barely missing the edge of his neck. The ninja leapt high up, crossing his fingers and consciously moving the energy through his system. It had taken him hours to make the energy flow naturally when he first learned the technique, and with the way his opponent looked at him now, he lacked that sort of time. He needed to go big.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

Six hundred copies burst into existence around him.

He bit back a curse, so his control had crapped out completely. He'd hoped for a number closer to a hundred. So much of his growth had come from filtering his massive amounts of chakra, leaving it untamed for any length of time asked for trouble. It needed to be his main priority.

The man rested his sword on his shoulder and glared up at him.

But first, this guy was going to eat dirt.

The Naruto army shook the air with a synchronized battle cry as they rained down on the swordsman, fists and feet raised to pummel him flat.

"Mizuchi."

The softly spoken word had been hidden by the shouting clones, but the effect of his sword piercing the ground was not. Hundreds of blades made from tightly compressed air erupted up around him in a protective dome, slicing and dissecting anything caught in their path. Naruto quickly pushed off of a clone's back out of the attack's range, a stray gust slicing the double to pieces an instant later.

Landing, he darted straight for the man. Long range was out, so close range would have to work.

The blade flashed and another torrent of razor wind rushed toward him. He twisted around it, the swordsman already over him and swinging down.

"Shunshin."

The energy wrapped around Naruto's body in a shell, and then rocketed him in an uncontrollable line three hundred yards away. He bounced and flopped along the ground for a hundred more feet before finally rolling into a crouch, blood trickling down from the cuts on his head.

That hadn't worked as planned.

The man charged at him again, rapidly closing the distance with burning eyes. Naruto stretched his hand out in front of him. The energy began to spiral into a dense sphere. Suddenly, shooting pain raced from his fingers up through his arm as the phantom sensation of it being ripped apart cancelled the technique.

A cold sweat breaking out on his pale face, he gave a shaky look down at his cramping, but unharmed, appendage.

What?

"Pay attention!" Eyes snapping up, Naruto flipped back as the blade swiped at his head, claiming a few blonde hairs. "What's the matter? You won't get your body back like this!"

The man kicked him hard in the rips. He coughed violently, the air in his lungs vomited up with specks of blood and spittle.

"Don't worry though, punk. If she's in trouble and can't handle it herself, I'll save that woman of yours."

"I-"

"Either way, I promise she'll be well taken care of."

"She wouldn't fall for a creep like you."

"Kid after she meets me, Hinata will forget all about you."

"You stay away from her!"

"Make me-"

A large red claw of energy caught him straight in the chest, soaring high up into the air and then slamming down into the ground.

Naruto crouched down on all fours. Enveloped in red with two fox tails swinging behind him, the ninja stalked up to the dust cloud. His feral eyes focused on the shadow climbing to its feet. That little attack wasn't going to take him out, and it wouldn't be any fun if it had.

No focus, don't let the demonic energy influence your thoughts.

The plume blew away in a burst of rage backed power. The swordsman stood proud, scuffed and bruised, but otherwise unfazed.

"You're going to pay for that, punk."

They exploded for each other, blade and claws clashing in a furious barrage of sparks and snarls. Naruto used his tails in conjunction with his hands and feet to strike at the man, the rapid fire barrage ensuring at least two attacks struck at any given time. He stabbed with his tail while throwing a kick or sweep low while punching high. The combinations once even made Lee break a sweat during one of their sparring practices.

And the bastard blocked all of them with a single sword.

Naruto sucked in a lungful of air and unleashed a might roar, knocking the man off balance long enough for him to slip underneath and slam both his feet up into the scowling jaw. Spinning on one hand, Naruto whipped the other around while extending another energy claw and catching the man in the side.

The man soared through the air. Two claws caught him and smashed him into the ground, pinning him in place as the bubbling energy sizzled and hissed. Naruto approached slowly. The bastard shouldn't be a problem held down like this, and ribs had definitely cracked.

"Who are you?"

Naruto's voice came out harsh and animalistic despite his best efforts. Even with the Kyubi dead and gone, its chakr- no, it wasn't chakra anymore. It was just energy. Regardless, it still radiated evil. It was really going to suck having to relearn how to mix it into his system again without Jiraiya's guidance. And he had just mastered it before he fought Madara too. Sure, the power still rested in him somewhere, barely out of reach, like whatever lurked behind that annoying sky.

"Kyo."

"Why are you trying to take my body?

"You didn't listen to a damn thing I said did you?"

"Stuff about swords, souls, soul swords, and spirits is kind of hard to follow."

"It's going to take a little history lesson."

He bit back a groan. That type of crap had been forgotten once he got out of the academy. It was the worse aspect of going there in the first place. Boring, confusing… boring, the last day of history class was the happiest day of his life.

"Fine, but keep it short."

"I died three hundred years ago. Something I couldn't kill hunted me down and killed me."

"What was it?"

"They called it a hollow. It was a soul warped into a monster by regret and negative emotions. You came across one once. It called itself the death god."

Naruto's eyes widened the fraction of an inch. The Shinigami, that wasn't a creature he wanted to remember. None of his attacks had done much against it, something about Reiryoku only damaging it. Now that he thought about it, hadn't he figured it out that that stuff was spiritual energy? Is that what he was utilizing now that he didn't have a body?

Since he was dead?

"So there's more than one of those things?"

"There are millions of them. Although now that I could become a soul, I'd crush every last one of them."

"You keep saying souls and spirits. What is all of that?"

"You are dense aren't you?" Naruto frowned and gave a warning squeeze. "Think of the soul as the physical body. It's more durable

and stronger than mortal flesh, but still has all the same sensations and weaknesses. The big difference is that souls are constructed out of what your world would call spiritual energy, reishi. The more you have the more powerful the soul becomes. The spirit is the individual's personality, who they are."

"So if my body is still unformed, we're talking as spirits right now?"

"Yep. This place is where our spirits can meet and communicate. It is identical to how you used to visit the giant fur ball. Enter your mind, and you'll find me here. I enter my mind, and I'll find you."

"And all the talk about being in a sword."

"We both have enough power that when the soul forms we will become Shinigami. Not the fake one from your world, but epitomized versions of ourselves."

"Epito- wha?"

"The best version, I was becoming an old man when alive, but I'm in my prime now. I'd still age in a soul, but it would be over hundreds, if not thousands, of years." The man shifted against the claws. "Shinigami create Zanpakuto, a sword that is an extension of the soul, but houses a different spirit. It is no different than you having two chakras and the fox in you, except one of the chakras and personalities is kept in a sword."

"How do you know so much about me?" Naruto dropped the cloak and the claws along with it. "Do spirits always fight over who goes into the sword and who goes into the soul?"

"Our situation isn't normal." Kyo sat up with a grunt and brushed himself off. "Normally, the other spirit is a reflection of a part of you. I'm from a completely different person. When I died, I took part in an experiment that would give me a chance to get another body, or at least add my power to someone worthwhile. You died, and for whatever reason, my spirit was similar enough to be drawn to you."

"And what, you can read my mind?"

"I was given all of your memories."

"Why don't I have any of yours?"

"You couldn't even remember your own name five minutes ago. The mind takes a little while to get back to normal after death, and with as simple as you are it will only take longer."

Naruto ignored the slight and cautiously walked up to Kyo.

"I remembered who I was after I died. Why did I forget?"

"You only woke up originally because of your power. Most people remain asleep until they've fully moved onto the afterlife. Of course, no one from your world actually comes over to this side. They go straight to the true afterlife. And no, I don't know how you are here. But as for the memory loss, when your entire spiritual being is nothing but a scrambled mess of energy, it takes a few moments for your brain to sort things out."

"So when people die, they become these Shinigami?"

"Only those with a high amount of spiritual energy, and again, that only relates to the people on this side."

"Who did this experiment and why did you do it, revenge?"

"The Shinigami have an entire society similar to the living world, scientists included. I agreed because I was the strongest when I was alive, and if that thing's alive again, I'm going to need to be again." Kyo rolled his neck and then leveled a smirk down at Naruto. "Actually, you know what? It might be kind of fun to see what you can do."

Kyo picked up his sword and climbed to his feet.

"What do you-?"

"That thing you saw messed up with us meeting directly. You were supposed to wake up right next to the physical form of our zanpakuto soon after your death. He did something that sent you and the other two spiraling off into the ether. I have no idea where you will wake up, and I'm not happy that it's taken this long for our spirits to meet up."

"How long has it been since I died?"

"Seven years."

Naruto's face fell. He'd thought maybe a few months had passed at most. So many things must have changed. Konoha would be rebuilt, and his friends would all be adults and maybe even have families of their own now. What about his parents? Did his death wreck them or did they press on like they always had?

What about Hinata and Lee? Were they even in the same world as him? Have they been asleep as well or did they wake up earlier like Kyo planned with him? Had they assumed he would never be with them again?

Did Hinata move on?

"Stop thinking so hard." Kyo moved in front of him and held out the hilt of the sword. "I've given you as much information as I can without knowing where you are. Wake up, find out where you are, and try to find my zanpakuto form. We'll meet up again when you find your feet."

"And how am I supposed to wake up?"

"Why do you think I'm handing you my power, stupid?" He nudged the hilt closer. "You're about to get a nice little jump start."

Genryusai sipped at the steaming green tea as the last of the white clad captains exited his personal office. The meeting of all captains

had become far more common place over the past year, and the three empty places sharply punctuated the betrayal of Aizen and his two cohorts. It amplified the hidden anxiousness they felt. A single captain was not easily replaced, especially one as dangerous as Gin Ichimaru or as skilled as Kaname Tosen. They lacked three, which also created the problem that three entire battalions were without full leadership. Though not without valiant effort, the vice-captains lacked the decisive power to keep their respective companies focused in the heat of battle.

Well, they were technically only down two captains. Tosen's replacement in the ninth division was promising, but unproven. Three months since his promotion, and he still had yet to meet the rest of the Gotei 13. The newcomer had already achieved great strides in reorganizing and solidifying his leadership, but even the most dedicated required time to fully grasp the responsibilities of a captain. He still depended on his vice-captain greatly for information on the day to day.

Hopefully, his previous experience as a leader would close the gap during all out warfare.

Genryusai set the cup down and stared at the rusted katana hanging on the far wall. The last artificial Zanpakuto remained dormant unlike the three others of its lot. Their wielders were now safely within the walls of the city. The recent two had yet to awaken, but if the first one was any indication, they would be immensely powerful assets.

Of course, that assumption relied entirely on who those people were. The first possessed honor and morality, a just and noble soul.

No one knew who would be beckoned by the artificial blades. They could be the heroes Soul Society needed - or the most terrible of villains.

It tickled.

Coming back to life, or after life, tickled. Like forming from vapor, energy churned and condensed as it shaped bones and muscles, skin and organs. It seemed to be a deliberate process, as if some great hand shaped each speck of ether into its original form, and then suddenly, the body was complete as if it had always been that way. There was no flash or dramatic actualization. He just simply existed again.

Naruto pat along his body. The sensations felt the same as before. He tentatively patted a little lower, breathing a sigh of relief. Everything was there. Pinching a cheek in each hand, he pulled his face wide, wincing at the sharp sting. The skin tightened back into place as he let go and ran his hands through same soft blonde hair he'd always known.

"Weird."

His voice sounded the same. Honestly, everything seemed the same, although he felt taller and leaner, but without a mirror who knew. The only things out of place were the baggy black kimono he wore. The pants billowed out around his legs and the top draped over his shoulders down his arms. It fit him well enough with the white obi around his waste keeping it together, but it was a far cry from his preferred attire.

"At least the obi could have been orange."

A sound teased his ears, and he focused his attention to his surroundings. The bright blue sky gifted the vast sands of the desert an air of tranquility. White towers jutted up out of the far off horizon, and if his senses weren't completely messed up, they were gigantic. Still, the entire setting seemed peaceful enough, except the air almost dripped with an unsettling atmosphere.

The sound echoed out again. While dull from distance, he still could tell metal clashing against metal created it. The echoes of shouts and screams only cemented his belief there was a fight going on near the towers.

"What to do?" Naruto folded his arms over his chest and closed his eyes in concentration. "Hmm."

He needed to know where the hell he was, and how to get to that Shinigami place. It'd probably help knowing what that actually was, but one step at a time. First, he needed to see who was around.

Sitting down in the sand, he cupped his hands together and stilled himself. He hadn't a clue to where his control stood, and if he could even activate Sage Mode as a dead guy. By consuming living nature energy would it bring him back to life? What if he became a zombie?

The image of his rotting corpse dressed in orange and mumbling threats at the gray blob in the hat sent a chill up his spine.

"Just a little bit at first."

He let everything go still as his energy reached out to pull in what surrounded him. Nothing. Did the technique fail? No, it actually worked perfectly. There simply wasn't any natural energy. Everything was lifeless.

"Being dead is going to suck."

Hopping to his feet, Naruto turned toward the sound of the battle, as flashes of light flickered in and out of existence. He wouldn't get anywhere standing around here. Brushing the sand off his pants, he pushed a little energy into his feet and blasted forward in a burst of sand.

His eyes stretched wide as he raced over the ground. He'd only applied a little bit so he wouldn't have to trudge through the sand, clearing expanses in seconds wasn't a consideration. This spiritual energy's potency compared to chakra like water did air. Had being alive really limited him this much? A cold chill ran up his spine.

"Lee's going to be unstoppable."

Crossing his fingers, he forced ten of an intended three clones into existence. They silently stopped and began to spread out across the desert. He needed his control back quickly or he'd be useless. His eyes drifted down to his empty palm.

The Rasengan failing fell under the same problem as a lack of control, but why it caused pain concerned him. His final technique was pure chaos in a ball and a spur of the moment creation. Did it damage him so badly his soul remembered it?

"That would be such bull-"

A concussive wave knocked him back a step as the sky blackened. Two different energies spiked as blue streams of light appeared in the sky. Gritting his teeth, Naruto dug in and ran harder. The source generating the beams definitely emanated a more bloodthirsty feel, and the other confronting it, while similarly dark, lacked the aggressive nature.

Naruto reached the base of the closest tower and leapt, his feet snagging onto the smooth wall with only mild difficulty. He stumbled once but managed to keep from falling. The less malevolent energy skyrocketed and Naruto heard something shatter as several of the beams roared by both sides of the tower.

"To defeat you Grimmjow!" Naruto could barely make out a voice as he approached the top. "To defeat you, and Ulquiorra, and Aizen!"

Naruto vaulted over the edge and landed smoothly on the top. Five claw shaped waves of blue energy split as a young man with orange hair ran his gleaming black daito through them. He couldn't make out who threw the energy wave, but whoever did lacked any chance of escaping the orange-haired kid's counter attack.

"Rukia, Chad, Uryu, Renji, and Orihime, I'm taking them all back with me." Naruto heard a gasp and he spotted a slender girl about Hinata's old age standing at the edge of the tower. Her long cinder hair billowed out as a small child in green rags wearing a skull

clutched to her legs. Her large eyes stared wide as the kid closed the last few feet. "I can't lose to you Grimmjow!"

Naruto watched as the kid dressed in an ankle length jacket, stabbed whoever floated in front of him. The blue sky returned as everything gradually settled. The Grimmjow guy muttered a curse before falling back. The victor caught him by the wrist then slowly lowered him down into the sand.

Naruto swallowed a lump in his throat. The attack wasn't as powerful as Madara's final move, but the size of the energy dwarfed anything he'd seen before - and that kid literally ripped it to pieces with a sword. If these guys were average in this world, every fight would be a major struggle. If they were weaker, he needed his strength back.

The kid effortlessly leapt and almost floated to the top of the tower. He smiled at the two girls at the edge of the tower. He spotted Naruto and his brown eyes narrowed slightly. Landing softly he moved in front of them, his blade hanging loosely in his grip.

"Who are you?"

Naruto eyed the blade and the worried looks on the girl's faces before meeting the kid's gaze. The youth stood about an inch shorter than he did, and he looked about sixteen or so. The kid's thin face dipped into a faint scowl. Naruto sucked in a breath and put on a wide smile as he scratched the back of his head.

"Naruto Uzumaki, and I'm kinda- really, really lost."

Author's Notes:

So a week later than planned but I'm finally getting the story reorganized and splitting that promo chapter from before Christmas into the first and second installments.

Bleary

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 2:

Sosuke Aizen propped his head up on his fist, the ghost of a bemused smile lining his lips. The unpleasant sensation of disappointment stirring within him was kept unseen. Gin may have sensed it, but his personal guard would remain silent. Really though, how could he not be disappointed. The one child he secretly invested so much into, the one who was to certify his power, barely survived his latest battle and would soon lose… badly.

To a mere number five no less.

While struggling to hide it, the orange haired youth was exhausted, fearful, and because of that, his spiritual pressure remained tenuous a best. Despite utilizing both Bankai and the hollow imbued mask, his power barely hovered above the level of when he faced Renji Abarai, long before he had acquired either of those powers. Ichigo Kurosaki was, and had the potential to be, the most powerful opponent he would ever face. The one being capable of standing on the same plateau. However, the issue remained that his power fluctuated so randomly it made him unreliable.

It was a shame, but number five would simply have to dispose of him.

How incredibly anti-climatic this all turned out to be. The Shinigami stumbled around in a perpetual game of catch up and had been effectively neutralized due to many years of subterfuge. Thinking back, perhaps he'd planned it out all too well. He honestly looked

forward to a token challenge prior to omnipotence. Now, he would most likely not even need to draw his own sword.

The image faded away when something maleficent crept up behind him; its aura like a thick ink poured out upon parchment. Casually glancing over his shoulder, his vision met a being cloaked in shadow.

Only a face splitting razor sharp grin emitted any light.

Were he anyone lesser, his skin would be crawling.

"Good evening." The thing spoke without opening its mouth, creating a slight muffled sound. "Might I have a minute of your time?"

Gin actually cracked an eye open as the figure revealed himself to the rest of the room. Tosen's sword struck out in a flash, resting a hair's width from the things neck. It never stopped smiling, or even acknowledged the dangerous blade. So either the creature was stupid, or powerful enough his enforcer's weapon didn't require notice.

"Tosen." Aizen waved his hand and the dreadlocked man slowly backed away, then gestured to a chair across the table. "Please sit, my unusual guest."

It emerged from the shadows, a creature unlike anything he had seen before. Rotund with gray skin and a face consuming grin, he would have mistaken it for a hollow if it were not for the Victorian top hat and trench coat.

And that malicious aura hiding under the surface.

"Why thank you." The creature gave an exaggerated bow and skipped over to the seat. "Might I beg a meal from you as well? I'm partial to either alligator or crocodile."

"What do you mean you're lost?" Ichigo glanced at Naruto's black clothes. "Aren't you a Shinigami?"

Naruto tugged at the loose cloth with a frown. Is that what this was? The red-eyed idiot really should have given him more to go on.

"I'm a ninja from a place called Konoha."

"Ninja?" Ichigo blinked. "You mean the guys in black gi and face masks who throw metal stars around?"

"We don't wear mask- well, most of us don't, and I don't think any of us ever wore whatever you're talking about. I'm talking real ninja. You know, chakra and jutsu and stuff."

"I only know the one type. Yours sound like something out of a kid's manga."

"A what?"

"Kurosaki-kun." The taller of the two girls took a step toward Ichigo. "Let me heal you while you talk."

"It can wait until I know who this guy is."

"I already told you who I am." Naruto crossed his arms over his chest. "You really don't listen well do you?"

"You-."

"You said I was a Shinigami. Do you know where I can find a society of Shinigami? Is it near here?"

Ichigo stared at him for moment.

"You really are lost."

"I told you that!" Naruto sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was obvious this new world had a lot of things very different from

his. Patience, he needed to be patient and not let his frustrations get the better of him. "Look, the only thing I know is that I'm dead, this world is not normally connected to mine, and this guy in my head told me to find his physical form, a Zanpaku- something. The only lead I have to getting that and all the other questions I have is to go to the place where the Shinigami live."

Ichigo and the girl shared a look.

"Kurosaki-kun, I think he's telling the truth."

"Yeah." Ichigo sat down and rested his sword across his lap. "Alright, we'll try to tell you as much as we can."

Naruto followed suit as the girl summoned three fairies with kite like wings from a pin in her hair and formed a barrier around the battered youth.

"My name is Ichigo Kurosaki. This is Orihime." He nodded his head at the girl healing him. "And we're in a place called Hueco Mundo."

"Hey, Ichigo, you didn't forget 'bout me did ya?" The little girl dressed in green squealed as she pounded her tiny fist on the barrier.

"Sorry, this is Nel."

Naruto pointed at the cracked skull over her head.

"What's with the freaky hat?"

"It's not a hat!" Nel furiously waved her fists in the air. "It's my mask."

Naruto raised an eyebrow and looked back to Ichigo for an explanation.

"Nel's an Arrancar, they're hollows who have gained powers similar to a Shinigami." He glanced down at her as she babbled insults at Naruto. "Although, she's odd even by their standards."

"I'd be right guessing Arrancar are much stronger than hollows, and that guy you were fighting was also an Arrancar?"

"Yes. He is one of the stronger ones known as the sixth Espada."

"Can you please quit throwing all the names and titles at me."

Ichigo's lips tightened into a condescending grin.

"It's not that hard if you focus."

"Yeah and my old instructor at the academy said the same thing. I'm smart enough to get that being called an Espada means he's strong, and the number's his rank. Is a higher or lower number stronger?"

"There are ten and the lower the number the stronger they get."

Well, that answered his question about their strength levels. Not good. The Ichigo kid barely beat one of them in the weaker half, and he himself couldn't stand up to either of them at his current ability. Heck, even his strength during the Madara fight might not do much against a one or two.

Naruto peered at the white stone on which he sat.

"So our main goal is to hide right now and find a way out of here."

"Speak for yourself. I've got to get my friends out of here."

"You just told me there're five more of these Espada guys stronger than the one you barely beat."

"I didn't barely win." Ichigo scoffed over his shoulder. "I crushed his final attack."

"You did, but it's obvious you struggled with the entire fight and took a lot of damage. Trust me, I've been in battle enough times to know when someone's outmatched."

"Why you little - what makes you think you can tell me-"

"First, I'm taller and older than you so stop talking down to me like some kid." Naruto rolled onto his feet and leaned closer to the barrier. "Second, I can't get to this other place without someone who knows how, and you're the only option I have right now. I may be being selfish, but I have friends that are in trouble too, and I won't let your stubbornness get in the way of that."

"So I should abandon my friends to help you?" Ichigo swung his arm in front of him. "I don't think so!"

"I never said abandon them." Naruto cracked a grin and stood upright. "I said we should hide. You have friends. I'll help you save them as payment for helping me, but we're going to do it smart by trying to get around them instead of smashing through."

Man, he could almost hear Ero-Sensei laughing at him.

"That's not possible for me." Ichigo relaxed. "I can't lower my Reiryoku well enough to keep hidden."

"I'm going to guess that's the spiritual component to chakra." Naruto scratched the back of his head. "I'd probably be best for me to go gather them up then. Point out where you last knew where they were and I'll-"

The headless body of Ichigo's former opponent landed between them, blood splaying out from the neck onto the tower's roof. Orihime gasped and took a step back as Ichigo's mouth fell open in shock. Naruto spun around and stared down over the edge. A tall lanky Arrancar with a patch over his left eye sneered sadistically up at him. In a whirl of sand, he whipped the giant double crescent scythe in his hand at the base of the tower.

Everyone struggled to stand as the pillar shook, then rapidly broke apart to pieces. Nel and Orihime both stumbled as the roof crumbled beneath their feet. Naruto dove for them, silently hoping Ichigo had

recovered enough to fend for himself. Catching them by their waists, he bounced from stone to falling stone until they reached the soft sand on the other side of the tower's remains. He gently set them down behind some large debris and held up his finger for them to be quiet.

Leaping up and over the wreckage, Naruto remained hidden in the dust cloud, keeping as far from Ichigo's presence as he could. If he guessed right, the Arrancar could sense the kid's power and would be drawn to him, which gave him the chance to sneak around and launch a surprise attack.

The dust swirled as Ichigo's power flared, Naruto could feel him explode out of the rubble straight for the Arrancar. Naruto exited from the other side and moved around enough to see Ichigo land in front of their opponent.

"Why did you do that to Grimmjow?" Ichigo's free hand clenched into a fist. "He couldn't even move!"

The Arrancar swung his odd scythe over his shoulder and spit into the sand.

"Eh, what the hell are you going on about? The weakling lost so he didn't deserve to live. Besides, why do you care? You're gonna be just as dead in a second!"

The scythe swung around and Ichigo barely brought his sword up in time to catch it. The Shinigami struggled for a second and then went tumbling through the sand. Naruto jumped forward, flipping in the air and bringing his heel down on top of the Arrancar's head. The blonde winced as he sprung back. It'd felt like he'd slammed his foot down on a boulder.

"Eh." The Arrancar twisted his head around. "Who the frick are you?"

Aizen stared over the top of his clasped fingers at the strange being devouring all the food being laid out in front of him.

"You have me at a loss, my guest. You ask for me to release Kurosaki and his friends, and then silently begin to consume my dinner table." Aizen let a hint of his power bleed out. "I have so many questions for you to answer."

"Yes, yes, how rude of me." The thing dabbed at its teeth with a napkin. "You have been most gracious, my dear host."

The thing hopped up and gave another exaggerated bow.

"I am the Millennium Earl." His yellow eyes glinted up over his wire rimmed glasses. "I am here to assist you in your goals."

"My goals are already well within reach. You, as odd as you are, provide me nothing I already possess."

"Oh, poor little pup. There is so much you don't understand." The Earl pinched his fingers together. "You know this teeny bit of a much grander puzzle."

As preposterous as this thing was, it amused him. Alright, he would entertain it for now.

"Then please, enlighten me."

"In the beginning, God created Heaven, Earth, and Hell. Earth was populated by these miserable creatures called humans, vile things steeped in sin and flesh. One day, I realized God's mistake in allowing them to exist and tasked myself with their destruction." The Earl spread his arms wide. "I cast down a glorious flood, wiping them from the Earth. Imagine, all those billions of spirits, all that energy simultaneously and violently being removed from their physical shells."

Aizen's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Such energy would have caused life and death to merge and end existence. As you can see, we are still here."

"No, you are here because it happened." The inhuman grin became even wider. "All those angry hateful souls swimming in a near infinite sea of power. What do you think spawned from that?"

"Hollows."

"Everything. The Hollows and their homeland Hueco Mundo were formed out of the negative, while Soul Society and the first Shinigami came from the positive. And like water trickling down a smooth surface, once the paths were created life and death followed them instead of reverting to its original cycle."

"What happened to those who died before your flood?"

"Their essence, the person within the soul, would move to Heaven or Hell. Their reishi, the spiritual atoms, floated in the ether." A maniacal look formed in his eyes. "It's what I used to summon the purging waves."

They stared at each other for a moment in silence as Aizen's enforcers shared a look. The creature went to start eating again, but Aizen placed both hands down on the table.

"An interesting tale, yet it fails to see what you can provide me."

"You wish to transcend the barrier of Shinigami and Hollow and sit upon the throne of the Spirit King." The Earl stretched his arms out wide. "I ask why merely rule what God created when you can become God and craft everything as you deem fit?"

Aizen's expression never flickered from its bemused state. However, the possibilities quickly ticked through his mind. The Spirit King, that freakish creature, was an abomination that allowed the world to churn in chaos. Even deposing it would only grant him the ability to rule through power. But to actually shape the worlds, it teased as an

interesting possibility, no hollow, no humans, no fragile balance between life and death.

The gray man twirled like a dancer and then bounced away from the table.

"Leaving so soon?"

"A good tale is told in parts. I will return tomorrow."

"I would appreciate an answer to one question?"

"Yes."

The word was drawn out childishly as he looked back.

"Why are you specifically requesting for the intruders to be let free?"

"I only care about one of them. I assumed she would obey better if we did not kill her friends. Her compliance is beneficial to our plans."

"And what do you get out of this?"

"In due time, I will reveal my fee. But first, we require the girl with the ability to reject fate."

The pain as her body dissolved seemed so agonizingly long when it occurred. She'd squeezed her eyes tight and died like she had fallen asleep. So now, in a soft bed as warm sunlight cascaded down on her, it felt like waking into a dream.

Hinata's purple eyes opened wide. She tilted her head to the left. Lee slept in a mess of balled up sheets, slightly snoring and mumbling incoherent praises of youth. Sitting up slowly, she studied the white kimono someone had wrapped her up in as she open and closed her hands.

The sheets, her skin, her hair, everything felt the same. Everything smelled the same. Why then, did it seem different… purer?

"You look bewildered."

Hinata's head snapped over toward the low voice coming from the doorway. Gaara stood proudly with his arms crossed over a body-length haori. It fit similarly to the robe he had worn as Kazekage. However, the only burgundy color came in the form of highlights to offset the white. The hilt of a sword hung loosely at his hip while the blade rested in a gourd styled sheath. The rings around his eyes remained prominent alongside the tattoo on his forehead, although his entire demeanor exuded a more relaxed aura.

"Kazekage-sama?"

Hinata knew she must have looked like a fish. Naruto's parents told her he died. She knew she died. Had someone saved her at the last minute? No, she knew the plant-man's acid had reached her. Even if she did escape, her skin would have been scarred beyond even Tsunade-sensei's abilities.

Unless, she shed her old skin like Orochimaru.

An unwanted shudder ran up through her body and she gripped her arms with almost pure white hands.

"It is always odd waking up as a soul." Gaara stepped into the room. "It takes your mind a while to process that you have died, but are now living."

"How-"

"Before I start answering questions, tell me, did we win? Did we beat Madara?"

Her face fell. Had they? She'd seen the unreal amounts of chakra in the tower alone. Her opponent was dead, but for Madara - she'd died

before having the chance. Naruto felt so strong and carried his confidence all the way to the end, but the chakra Madara must have wielded had to have been a force of nature. But Naruto wasn't here like her and Lee were. Had he won then? What if he was still alive… and alone again?

"I don't know." Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. "Madara had unleashed the Kyubi on Konoha. Naruto defeated it and we confronted Madara and his two remaining followers at a tower he constructed. I defeated my opponent but died immediately after from my injuries. I don't know if Lee or Naruto beat him."

"The Uchiha succeeded in gaining all the tailed beasts' power then."

"He was so powerful he didn't even seem human anymore." She waved her hands in front of her. "I'm sorry Kazekage-sama. I shouldn't be sounding so hopeless."

"It sounded like a hopeless situation." His lip tugged up slightly. "However, that is the type of scenario Naruto Uzumaki usually finds himself in."

She smiled softly.

"Yes, he does."

"How bad was the Kyubi's attack?"

"The villagers had no choice but to abandon the village." Hinata spotted the faintest glimmer of worry creep over his face. "I know Temari was okay and the area where the Suna villagers settled was mostly evacuated by the time the fox arrived at that area."

"All of us accepted the fact there were no more Suna villagers after Danzo's decimation of our original home. Suna never possessed enough resources to justify reestablishing the village. Your Hokage and I had already agreed to cede the territory to Konoha. While I am glad they were mostly unharmed, they still lost another home."

"I know it doesn't diminish their suffering, but the Yondaime said they would rebuild in time."

"Yes, I am sure they would." He let out a tired sigh. "There is no point discussing this further when we can do nothing of it. I trust Naruto succeeded, or someone else did in his stead."

"You're right, Kazekage-sama."

"I am no longer a Kage. You can address me with my title of Taicho, or since it was likely for you to marry Naruto, you are welcome to simply call me Gaara." Despite the pale tone of her skin, Hinata still managed to summon a furious blush. "Hm, so your skin can produce color."

Lee let out a soft snort, mercifully drawing Gaara's attention away. The ex-sand-nin grabbed the sleeping ninja's foot and tossed him off the bed. Lee crashed onto the ground with a yelp. He groggily looked up and blinked a few times.

"Wha- I am alive?" Lee rocketed to his feet and gripped his chest over his heart. "But, I accessed the final gate. And my leg…"

"Lee-kun." Hinata climbed out of bed. "Are you okay?"

"Hinata-san?" Lee's roundish eyes dropped to the ground. "You perished as well then."

"I- don't know." A swell of conflicting emotions tightened in her chest. They were dead weren't they? She knew it, but then again, why was she up walking and talking like always? "Gaara-san?"

He nodded slowly and folded his arms over his chest.

"Yes. All of us have passed onto another life. I will tell you as much as I know about our - unique situation. However, I must ask you, Rock Lee. Do you know if Madara was defeated?"

Lee shook his head in the negative.

"I never faced him. While my own battle burned brightly, my adversary forced me to sacrifice myself to ensure his defeat."

"I see." Gaara spun on his heel and headed for the doorway. "I will have someone deliver you a Shihakusho. It will be much easier to show you the city as we talk."

"Gaara-san?" Hinata shared a confused look with Lee. "Where are we?"

"You are in Seireitei." He strode through the door. "The Soul Society."

Naruto bit back a curse. Someone further out was having a blast killing off all his clones. From the clothes and the bone mask fragment on his face, he must be another Arrancar. It wouldn't take long for him to pick up on Ichigo's and their current problem's gigantic presences. At least his control seemed to be a little better. Not great by any means, but enough he could potentially use the Rasengan with a Bunshin's help.

Crossing his fingers in front of him out of reflex, he pushed the energy through his system more easily than his last attempt. Four of an intended five popped into existence. The lanky Espada blinked in surprise as three duplicates rushed forward.

Reaching his hand back, the remaining clone got into position as Naruto pushed power into his palm. Sharp pain ran up his arm as his fingers cramped. The clone grabbed the back of his kimono and yanked him back, the massive scythe nicking tip of his chin. The clone flung him high above the fray as the Arrancar sliced it in half. With a sadistic sneer, the Espada clasped the chain attached to the bottom of the weapon and flung the scythe itself straight for Naruto.

"Oh shi-"

Ichigo appeared in a blur, knocking the giant blade to the side. His face covered in a white mask with dark red streaks splayed out on the left half. Lifting the black daito high into the air, black energy outlined in crimson surged around the tip.

"Getsuga." Ichigo's voice reverberated against itself like a growl. "Tensho!"

Ichigo swung down, a giant arc slammed down on the Arrancar and everything surrounding him.

Naruto landed smoothly as dust billowed up from the man-made crater. A nervous bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck. Ichigo was an Arrancar? No, he felt different, reversed from the Arrancar. Still, he glanced up as Ichigo dispelled his mask and fought to keep his breath under control, that creepy voice, while Ichigo's, sounded uncomfortably similar to that fake death god he met in his seal.

A soft rattle of chains echoed form within the cloud. Where the hell did that scythe go?

"Ichigo, the scythe's gone." Naruto crossed his finger and summoned ten Bunshin. "He's still alive!"

Leaping back as the crescent blade whipped out in an upward circle, Naruto reached a hand back and summoned the energy again. Come on, he could do this. Focu- a debilitating spasm forced him to grab his hand with his unfazed one.

"Damn it." He mumbled and squeezed down on the worsening palm. "Knock it off."

Ichigo flipped over the scythe and dove straight into the dust. A shriek of metal on metal echoed across the desert. Naruto cradled his hand tighter to his chest and Ichigo was knocked out of the dust and skid on his back in a wake of sand. The Arrancar stepped out of the crater dirty but ultimately unharmed.

"What the hell makes you think that dull-ass piece of scrap metal is going to cut me?" He sharply pulled at the chain and the scythe sailed back to him. He stuck out his tongue, proudly displaying the five tattooed on the pink flesh. "You see that Shinigami? That means I'm a lot stronger than the weakling you just barely defeated. And you want to know what sucks worse? My Hierro is the toughest out of all the Espada!"

Ichigo climbed to his feet far slower than Naruto would have liked. The youth spit out a mouthful of blood as a bruise formed on his cheek. This wasn't good. Ichigo's power wavered between high and low, and even when it peaked with the mask on, it hadn't really fazed the bastard. And if Hierro was basically an Arrancar's skin, they didn't have any means of taking him on.

The muscles in his hand cramped tighter. Now was not the time for his body to be rebelling.

Ichigo blasted toward the humanized hollow. Bringing his blade wide, he swung and another wave of energy raced out from the blade. Twice the size but with no form, it seemed far weaker than anything Naruto had seen the Shinigami throw up to this point despite looking intimidating.

I can't lower my Reiryoku enough.

"He has zero control over his power." Naruto watched as the Arrancar literally walked through the blast as if it were a gentle breeze. "The idiot probably doesn't even realize it."

Damn it. He'd been alive for less than an hour and he was going to die again because of an untrained kid and a stupid hand. How was he supposed to find Hinata and Lee if it ended now? He couldn't use the fox's power with his current control. He'd need at least four tales and he barely brought himself back from two. The pain intensified.

"Cut it out!"

Naruto bit down on his hand as hard as he could. Tendons and bone crunched as flesh split. Blood dribbled out of his mouth as he held it there and the hand went still. Everyone paused and stared at him in disbelief as he slowly released his hand and rose to his feet.

"On my first mission I panicked. My body froze and I couldn't do anything but watch." Naruto held his bloody hand out to the side and one of the few remaining clones ran up to it. "I swore I wouldn't let that happen again. I can't let that happen again if I'm going to get out of this place." Blue energy sprung form his palm as the clone shaped it into a sphere and added the familiar rotation. "Ichigo, get me an opening."

The younger man nodded and dragged his hands over his face, the bone mask appearing as his irises yellowed and the white of his eyes changed to black. Charging with a shout, Ichigo's blade crashed down onto the Espada's neck in a shower of sparks.

"Are you frikin stupid?" The thin giant clasped the blade with his bare hand. "I told you your little sword can't cut me!"

Naruto slid in front of them and slammed the spinning orb into their enemy's belly. The duo pressed their attacks harder as the Arrancar's feet started to slide. With a final shout, Naruto released the attack and Ichigo knocked the humanized hollow backward into the tower's remains.

"Was." Ichigo's chest heaved as his mask crumbled away and voice became normal. "You know what? I'm too tired to care why you're trying to eat your hand."

"We need to get out of here before he gets back up and the other one shows up."

"The other one?"

"You will not escape Nnoitra-sama."

Naruto cursed under his breath as the Arrancar who destroyed his clones walked out from around the corner holding Orihime by the neck and Nel by the back of her tattered robes. The little green-haired one did not look well, shivering and sickly sweating.

"I see you've recollected pet-sama, Tesra." Nnoitra propped his weapon on his shoulder and sauntered out. "You friggin weaklings couldn't even manage to knock me off my feet working together. Hell, you miserable bitches couldn't even scratch my clothes!"

"Nnoitra-sama, I found her along with the escaped Orihime Inoue." Tesra tossed Nel over to the base of the tall Arrancar's feet. "Shall I eliminate the Shinigami while you deal with her?"

"Nel Tu, the former third Espada." Nnoitra bent over and picker her up by the skull. "Ain't this a kick!"

"Nel!" Orihime cried out, but Tesra pulled her tighter in the chokehold.

"Put Nel down you bastard," Ichigo growled out as he lifted his blade in front of him.

"Like you can do anything about it. Besides, why the hell would a Shinigami want to protect an Espada?" Nnoitra shook Nel roughly. "Who knew you were such a deceitful bitch."

"I's never an Espada." Nel desperately tried to get Nnoitra's hand off her head as fresh tears streamed down her cheeks. "I didn't lie to anyone!"

Naruto scanned everyone. Two hostages, an exhausted ally, and two enemies, one who they couldn't touch, it was a scenario from hell. What was worse is that Tesra guy watched him like a hawk. Everyone else kept their attention on the drama playing out in front of them, but that one was sharp enough to keep an eye on him. It didn't help his blood boiled watching that lanky jackass swing the goofy little girl around like a toy.

"Are you kidding me?" Nnoitra flung her roughly into Ichigo. "You get your mask cracked by me and forget everything?"

Ichigo stepped back as he caught Nel to soften the impact. She buried her head into his chest and openly sobbed. The youth kept his brown eyes glued on the biggest threat, but placed a reassuring hand on her head.

"I didn- lie to you, hic, chigo. I promise."

"Of course you didn't, Nel."

"Ichigo." Naruto kept his voice low so no one else could hear. "You think you can deal with that other one enough to get Orihime?"

"I don't know what you're planning, but if your last attack was the best you have, you can't handle Nnoitra."

"I've got something else, but there's no guarantee I won't hurt everyone. Get the girls out of here and then come back for me when you feel me calm down - if I calm down."

"What-"

Naruto crossed his arms in front of his face and pulled deep at the malevolent energy hidden within him. He needed to go for at least four tails. The Kyubi's soul wasn't in him so he didn't have to contend with something trying to actively consume him. It was just a naturally corrupting energy he needed to resist.

The aura bubbled out first as his eyes reddened and whisker marks darkened. Three tails grew out from the main mass surrounding his body, and they swept the ground with each agitated flick. His lips curled up into a fierce snarl as the fourth started to shape and the cloak darkened.

"Time to rip this nuisance apart."

Not happening..

Almost as if someone had flicked a switch, the demonic power diminished and then disappeared. Nnoitra cocked his head to the side while Tesra tightened his grip on a shocked Orihime. Ichigo blinked.

"Was that it?"

Naruto felt his heart sink into his gut. What the hell happened? That voice, he knew it belonged to that Kyo jerk. Why did he do that? It was their last chance at escaping.

Nnoitra exhaled in a bitter sigh.

"Tesra, let's switch. Teasing pet-sama would be more fun then dicing up these weaklings."

"Yes sir." The blonde Arrancar handed Orihime off and drew his sword. "Crush, Verruga."

The blade disappeared and a surge of light enveloped him. It faded to reveal the once slim man had transformed in to an overly muscular giant. Brown fur replaced once normal skin as a warthog skull encased his head. A thin tail swished behind the pig like legs as he took a powerful step closer.

"Naruto, take Nel." Ichigo passed the child over to the blonde. "I'll deal with him."

"We'd be better fighting as a team."

"I can handle him."

He disappeared in a showing of pure speed and reappeared to the side of the were-warthog. Slashing up, he barely missed as the behemoth leaned back then suddenly moved in and brought an elbow down onto Ichigo's collarbone with an echoing crunch. Ichigo barely managed a grunt as a massive fist smashed into his gut.

Blood and spittle escaped his mouth as the fist buried itself enough his back bulged.

Naruto slammed a Rasengan into the monstrosities back. Tesra stumbled forward and Naruto tackled him.

"Bunshin Daibakuha!"

The real Naruto scooped up Ichigo and sprinted away as the clone detonated in a huge explosion of fire and sand.

"Tesra!" Nnoitra flung Orihime to the side and readied his weapon for a throw.

The beast raced out of the flames and caught Naruto by the arm and swung him up high and slammed him into the ground with crater creating force. The ex-ninja gasped as the wind was knocked out of his lungs. Rolling on instinct, a hoof stabbed the ground right where his head had been.

"I am fine, Nnoitra-sama. My fur is just a little singed."

Naruto brought his hands up in a guard as the monster strode out of the crater. His teeth clenched the blonde's knuckles whitened. His exploding clone didn't do as much as he wanted, but it did more than the oversized pig wanted to admit. Maybe no one else noticed, but there was a slight wobble in his walk. He just needed a bigger boom and maybe a way to get past that Hierro thing.

"Naruto, Ichigo's not breat-ing!" Nel shook Ichigo as fresh tears started to build up. "Come on Ichigo, you gots ta get up. You can't leave us like this. Ichigo, Ichigo!"

"Kurosaki-kun!" Orihime ran for the still Shinigami, but Nnoitra caught her by the back of the head and forced her to her knees.

"Pet-sama." Nnoitra's voice dragged out in a mocking purr. "Be quiet and watch as your hero dies trying to rescue you."

"Ichigo!"

"Kurosaki-kun."

"Naruto, do something!"

"Like that weakling can do anything."

"Naruto, please."

"Kurosaki-kun."

"Do something!"

Naruto crossed his fingers so hard the he was surprised they didn't break. It had been a long time since he'd felt this powerless. Ever since his training trip with his perverted teacher, every battle depended on drawing from a powerful arsenal of jutsu in the most effective means possible. He never lacked for a decisive technique in his battles with Sasuke and the Akatsuki. And of course, there was always that last ditch move he could pull out to claim victory. He wasn't limited like he had been in the beginning - like he was now.

He had his clones. They could blow up. He needed to get creative.

"Taju Kage Bunshin no Jutsu."

Five hundred clones entered the fray. Some immediately transformed into kunai while others became giant windmill shuriken. They rained down on Tesra, stabbing and slashing, earning shallow cuts. If one was punched or smashed out of existence, another quickly took his place. Overwhelmed, the pig-man swatted and kicked at anything that moved.

The faction holding the shuriken leapt high into the air and flung the clone weapons for Nnoitra and Orihime. The sadistic Arrancar's eyes widened and he quickly shielded the orange haired woman from the barrage, the windmills bouncing off his skin harmlessly.

"When are you are you gonna realize I-"

A clone dropped its henge technique and flung a small throwing star straight into the gloating Espada's mouth. The clone grinned.

"Bunshin Daibakuha."

Nnoitra's head snapped back as the explosion filled his mouth and scorched down his throat. The clone grabbed Orihime and bolted away as the battlefield erupted in a deafening roar of detonating Bunshin.

"Soten Kisshun, I reject ."

The fairies streaked out from her hair pin and flew over to Ichigo's ravaged body, an orange shield rapidly surrounding him and Nel. Sweat dripped from Naruto's face as exhaustion filled his muscles. That show put him near empty because of all the wasted energy. He needed to get everyone out before anyone else decided to show up and mess with them.

"Can we move him while you heal him?" Naruto asked as his clone set her down beside him. "Even with these guys down, I probably just alerted everyone in a hundred miles where we were."

"No." She shook her head and knelt down next to the barrier. "My Rikka envelop him entirely so there is no way to carry him. I haven't trained my power enough to utilize another ability simultaneously."

"Great." Naruto kept his attention focused on the smoke. They could still be in there just shocked enough to buy them a slim window to escape. No, they definitely were only stunned and half buried. "Get him breathing; we need to find a place to hide."

"But-"

"If we stay here for much longer we're going to get caught, and none of us can fight right now. I know it's a risk moving him so badly hurt,

but if he stands any chance at all, we have to go and we have to do it now."

Large gray eyes filled with worry dropped back down as Ichigo's chest shakily began to rise and lower. Orihime clasped her hands in front of her. Naruto frowned when she didn't drop the technique. She probably knew the kid wasn't ready to move and wanted to stretch it out to the last possible second. Hell, he knew and it wasn't his technique.

"I'm sorry, Uzumaki-san, but he still can't breath on his own and if I release the technique to move him…"

"I know. Damn it, I know." He gripped his hair and gave it a painful tug. "How about you, Nel? You got beat up pretty good."

She twisted up from Ichigo's chest. The crack on her hollow mask had sealed slightly. Naruto slowly released his hair and studied her. Was she taller?

"I feel weird." She tugged at the eye socket in the mask. "It itches."

"Orihime - get Nel out of the technique."

"What?"

"You're healing her mask." His mouth started to dry as he could almost watch the crack mend. "From what that bastard Nnoitra said, he damaged her mask and she lost her power and memories."

She gasped and watched as Nel fully stood, almost a foot taller than her previously diminutive size.

"What are you guys whispering about?" She glanced down at her now knee length rags. "Gah, my clothes are shrinking!"

Naruto cocked an eyebrow as she broke out into another intelligible rant, only the words 'perverts' and 'virgins' came through clear enough to understand.

"Uzumaki-san, what do we do? Nel is-"

Naruto watched as Nel grabbed the edge of Ichigo's long coat and wrapped herself up in it so only her hazel eyes poked out. She definitely didn't seem evil like the other two Espada he'd seen. Of course, that didn't mean her personality wouldn't flip once her memories came back and she could easily kill all of them. He'd given Sasuke the benefit of the doubt and it cost him Sakura.

He'd done the same for Gaara and gained a lifelong friend.

Two oppressive pressures, uncomfortably similar to killing intent, spiked within the smoke drenched battlefield behind them. He whirled around and gritted his teeth. There went that hope.

"Can he survive us moving him?"

"I don't know. He's still barely holding on."

"That's going to have to work."

She dispelled the technique and he created two Bunshin. One scooped her up and the other Ichigo. He slung Nel over his back and took off in a mad sprint. If they could make it to the rest of the towers, they could find a place to hide. Maybe, he could find a way to talk to Kyo and find out why the hell he stopped him from pulling out his demonic chakr- energy.

Tesra's shadow fell over him. Dodging to the side as the fist smashed down beside him, he twisted in the air and cringed as the pole end of Nnoitra's scythe sideswiped him. He cradled Nel in his arms and skid across the sand. Unsteadily scrambling to his feet, Naruto forced himself to suck in a deep breath under the protest of broken ribs.

Tesra and Nnoitra stood side by side. Black patches of char decorated large portions of the former's torso and the left tusk of his mask had been snapped off. The latter's jaw was missing and a

burnt hole remained where a nose once sat. Well, at least the foul-mouthed creep would finally shut up.

"You posses a wide away of infuriating techniques, Shinigami."

"I'm a ninja, not a Shinigami." How was he going to get out of this one? Could he form a Rasenshuriken? Did his energy even carry a wind element anymore? "You smell a little overcooked, pork loin. Maybe you and your master should call it a day."

Nnoitra answered by lunging forward and swinging his scythe down in an attempt to split him and Nel in half. Caught in a frantic backpedal, Naruto struggled to weave in and out of an onslaught of cleaving strikes, the mocking glint in the Arrancar's coal pupil completely replaced with a barely sane rage.

"Keep moving back, Naruto." Nel whispered so softly he barely heard her. "Get close to Ichigo and Orihime and I'll get us out of here."

Her voice, while still young, lacked the childish lisp from earlier. Was she still growing? Outside of a small missing patch, her mask was almost completely reformed. He arched back as the scythe passed a paper's width from his throat. He couldn't worry about that now.

"Form on me!"

Pushing as much energy as he dared to the bottom of his feet, he sprang back and the clones grouped up on either side of him. Nel crawled over his shoulder and hopped down, running to the back and lifting her arms up high as Tesra charged. The air itself rumbled as a gaping black maw ripped open in the air itself.

"Quick, get in!" Nel waved them in.

She guided the Ichigo carrying clone in by the hand as Naruto and the other clone dodged Tesra's tackle. The behemoth spun, stretching out an arm and backhanded Naruto into the portal. He

pulled Orihime free from the clone and flung her away before diving into the blackness himself.

The distortion closed, leaving the cinder haired girl crumpled on the desert floor; the cruel Espada looming over her.

Author's Notes:

And with this the story is properly organized. I hope you enjoyed my attempt at a longer fight scene.

Clearing

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 3:

Hinata bit back a wince as she stared at Gaara's back. They had exited the infirmary to a city of towering white buildings and ornate walls. Far larger than Konoha, the city's architecture matched a more traditional aesthetic, much like the Hyuga compound. Out of habit more than curiosity, she had activated her eyes to map out her surroundings.

The pain had been unreal.

Instead of seeing everything within her sphere or where she stretched her attention, only blurry streaks of color warped by her at light speed. Rapid shots of pain had stabbed under her skull as if her brain was being flayed then twisted into knots. Somehow, she'd deactivated it quickly enough to prevent herself from fainting, and fortunately, Lee's excitement distracted Gaara long enough for her to regain a little composure.

"This is Seireitei, the home of all Shinigami. We're in the 4th Squad's jurisdiction right now. There are twelve more divisions, most with a particular focus, similar to how you Konoha-nin specialized your genin teams."

Why did her head feel like a hammer split it open?

"How many Shinigami are there, Gaara-san?" Lee swung his arms back and forth then tugged on the sleeves of the black kimono he'd been provided.

"I don't know for certain - hundreds, maybe thousands."

Her eyes themselves didn't hurt or feel off. Did that really matter though? Between her own experimental evolution under her sensei and Danzo's use of Orochimaru's research, no one knew how stable her body was. How that mattered in death was another matter entirely.

"Are you okay, Hinata-san?" Lee slowed his pace and faced her. "You are slowing down."

"I'm sorry, Lee-kun." She forced a smile as her eyes closed. "I'm just a little lost in thought with everything."

"Fear not my friend." Lee struck his infamous nice guy pose. "I know Naruto will soon be here, and then we can push forward into this new world proudly and burning with youth!"

Gaara rubbed the tattoo on his forehead as Hinata stifled a giggle.

"I can only imagine the chaos both you and Uzumaki will bring to this place."

Hinata's lips tightened as another pang shot through her brain. The world tilted and she blinked quickly to correct her vision, only to be met with the blue sky speckled in puffy white clouds. Her two companion's faces appeared overhead. Was Lee holding her? Her sense of touch felt so murky.

"We're taking her back to the infirmary. I will make sure the fourth squad captain personally examines her."

"Is this normal, Gaara-san?"

"Our entire situation is abnormal. However, I doubt this should be happening."

He disappeared without his normal flourish of sand.

"What-"

"Hinata-san, it is okay. We will take you to someone who will help you."

She felt a tickle over her lip and gently reached up, her fingers brushing something warm and coming away stained red.

Naruto crashed down through the tree line, smashing into the ground and kicking up a dust. A groan escaped his mouth as he stretched out onto his belly and fisted a handful of soft dirt. Nel landed on his back, his spine cracking in a loud chorus of pops as air rushed from his lungs. She thrust her hands up in the air, her fingers splayed into a V.

"Operation 'escape the bad guys,' success!"

"Nel, get off of me." Naruto mumbled and placed his head on the ground. She continued to roar in victory. His eyes drifted over to Ichigo. The carrot-haired youth draped limply over a branch, but his sword remained tightly clenched in his grip. "You alive, Ichigo?"

The Shinigami didn't respond, but his back raised and lowered with shaky breaths.

"Good enough."

Nel hopped off his back with a flip and landed in a dramatic pose with arms outstretched. Dragging himself to his feet, Naruto absently patted off his clothes and inhaled the earthy smell of the forest around him. The ghost of a smile teased his lips as his nose took in the scents of familiarity. Lush green leaves allowed only streams of light to filter through the massive trees as patches of grass and underbrush struggled to grow in the shadows. Everything radiated with life unlike that desert hellhole. It wasn't Konoha's forests, but an acceptable substitute.

He never wanted to go to that dead place ever again.

Nel continued to dance and pose triumphantly and his smile deepened.

When they leapt into the void, he knew the were-warthog followed them in. The little green robed Arrancar did something while they were falling, almost like making a second door that pulled them further in and away from him. It should mean they were safe for now. His instincts didn't buy it though and unease gnawed away at his gut. They needed to put some distance between them and their landing spot. Then, he should take a look above the tree tops and see if he could spot a city or anything that might give them some direction.

He extracted Ichigo from the branch and laid him out flat on the ground.

"At least you're breathing better." Naruto stood back up. "Now to figure out where we are."

"We're in the Soul Society." Nel chirped and skipped over to them. "It's a death sentence to hollow, but the home of the Shinigami."

"Doesn't that kind of put you in a bad place?" He tapped the bone mask covering her head. "Or are you human enough for them not to care?"

"Nope, I'm probably dead." She leaned over Ichigo. "Shinigami aren't a flexible bunch. They feel Hollows are bad and Arrancar are worse."

"You're not. At least this version of you isn't."

"I'm an oddball."

She opened her mouth wide and an unnatural amount of drool poured down on Ichigo.

"What are you doing?"

"My saliva can heal people a little." She wiped her mouth. "Give me a moment and I'll get your hand and side."

"I'm good… thanks."

"Don't be a baby."

He held up his unscathed hand.

"I heal quick on my own." He cringed as she spit out another mouthful of fluid on the carrot. "If these Shinigami guys are so quick to kill, why are you with Ichigo?"

"Until I met Ichigo and his friends, I thought all Shinigami were bad guys and Hollows just wanted to be left alone in the desert of Hueco Mundo." She scratched where the crack in her mask had healed some. "Although, meeting the Espada made me think maybe we're the bad guys. My brain's kind of weird right now. I'm knowing stuff I didn't think I knew."

He lifted Ichigo up and draped an arm over his shoulder, the slime sticking to his back. If what she was telling the truth, he needed to make sure she stayed close and safe. Ex-Espada or not, she'd proven whose side she was on. Jiraiya would probably yell at him for trusting so easily, but because her mask had stopped mending, she wasn't a threat. He could afford to have faith in her, and he'd keep a careful eye out for a potential trap.

"I'll protect you, Nel. I promise." She gave him a big toothy grin which he mirrored. "So, you have any idea which way we should go?"

She shrugged her shoulders and started off in a random direction.

Shifting Ichigo's weight more evenly across his shoulders, Naruto followed after the marching Arrancar. He never noticed the crimson eyes watching them from the underbrush.

Aizen stared off the balcony overlooking the pearl white desert of Hueco Mundo. Something beautiful developed from the infinite vastness of it all under an unending night sky. The stillness it possessed allowed him to compartmentalize his thoughts or simply bestow a moment to enjoy the silence.

For the first time, in perhaps hundreds of years, genuine surprise tickled his thoughts. While not one to become giddy at the thought of godhood, the idea decades of planning and goals could suddenly shift, or even his consideration of it shifting, stirred a speck of excitement to slowly build in his chest. His singular goal up to this point had been to transcend the barrier between Shinigami and Hollow. Neither the hollowfied Shinigami, like Ichigo and the other Visored with their masks, nor his own Arrancar, ever achieved a true nullification of the differences between their respective races.

Obtaining that form, something new and apart from old creation, would bestow him with the power to rise to the throne of the Spirit King. Kurosaki had unwittingly promised to be his sole obstacle. He'd savored the idea of a climatic battle between him and the hybrid youth. The human child, born with a soul naturally processing both the powers of Shinigami and Hollow, against himself, the transcendent. It should have been a battle of gods.

The strange gray man changed all of that with a simple, unsubstantiated, and likely impossible proclamation.

Yet, the one aspect teasing at the truth was the creature's insistence on Orihime Inoue. The girl's mysterious power carried a potency strong enough to reject any event. He had merely utilized her to repair a cracked Hogyoku, but if he were to use the omnipotent sphere to enhance her abilities… yes, the prospect promised intriguing results. Ironically, if used to reform creation, she truly would trample upon God's domain as he once claimed.

"I see my words have got you thinking, my future ascendant."

The Earl gazed up at the eternally full moon as its pale glow reflected brightly off his glasses.

"I am surprised to see you again so soon, my guest."

"I was so afraid you wouldn't sleep tonight if I didn't offer an explanation, a future god requires a great deal of sleep."

"Your concern is appreciated but unneeded." Aizen rested his forearms on the balcony's banister. "Your proposal, while vague, does have traces of believability."

"Tell me. What have you figured out so far?"

"You want to use the Hogyoku to bolster Orihime's powers. Doing so would allow you to essentially reject the world itself. However, her abilities, no matter how strong, lack the quality to actually create. There is another piece to this puzzle."

Even with no visible neck, the rotund man still nodded.

"I will save the full story until another time. However, you should know I was defeated by a man during the flood, and his powers laid the seeds to my second defeat." The creature's gloved hand clenched slightly. "This man, blessed in power and spirit, originated from another world separate from our own. This world is home to many people with the ability to mix their spiritual powers with their mortal bodies."

"They would provide fuel for the Hogyoku?"

"No, they would provide an army of abnormally powerful Hollows." The Earl rocked back on his heels and clasped his hands behind his back. "Because their spiritual energy is tied to their physical powers, it is deluded. So while it would sufficiently attract Hollows who wish to feed on their souls, they would be unable to fight back an invasion."

"They would die, strengthen our current forces, and if not completely consumed, become powerful Hollow themselves. Transforming them into Arrancar would increase the benefits even further. However, my Espada have left the Shinigami scrambling. I see little need to widen the already considerable gap."

"Overconfidence ruins the most solid framework."

"It is not that I believe I cannot be defeated. It is that our efforts could be focused on matters not already well developed."

"You underestimate how powerful these humans are free of their mortal coil." The Earl cocked his head to the side so his leer took on a dangerous glint. "Or were you unaware of the young man who assisted in the substitute Shinigami's escape?"

Aizen's smile deepened knowingly.

"His powers combined with Ichigo Kurosaki's only allowed them to escape a mere number five."

A slow deep chuckle rumbled out of the Earl's clenched teeth.

"And tell me, my little pup, how many Shinigami have their powers fully intact when first awakening as a soul - before they even acquire their Zanpakuto?" The Earl turned back to the moon as the traitorous Shinigami's eyes hardened. "Yes, the scamp survived against your precious Espada within a mere hour of materializing in the afterlife."

"I see." Aizen pushed himself up to his full height as he reverted his gaze out across the expanse of Hueco Mundo. For them to pose any difficulty, they would need to stand at least at the average captain's level of power and boast greater skill. "And do you know how strong he was, in his world?"

"The third strongest and their greatest champion, he, and the three others with him, have the power to close that so called considerable

gap of yours." He hopped and faced Aizen fully. "Do not fret, I shall keep them suitably entertained and out of our way."

"By attacking their home?"

"If they make it that far, yes. It will at least disguise the true reason for our invasion."

"Which is?"

"Your caged bird is only half of the columns to our altar. In that world, there is another who has control over life and death. His ringed eyes allow him to bridge the soul to its resurrection, to control life and death."

Retsu Unohana rested her hands on both sides of the unconscious Hinata's head. For whatever reason, Lee felt reassured by the woman's presence. Maybe it was because she had been the one to finally get Hinata-san to stop shaking and bleeding, or maybe, she reminded him of Sakura-san in how she cared for a patient.

Unlike his crush, however, the woman carried an awe inspiring calm. He had, admittedly, been unyouthfully difficult. Three other medical Shinigami failed to ease his teammate's suffering while Gaara searched for their captain and each failure encouraged more threatening behavior. Hinata-san was strong, but vulnerable right now, and required a friend's protection. It would not do for her to-before she could reunite with Naruto.

Still, he should not have smashed that desk in frustration.

Unohana stepped back from a far more peaceful Hinata and walked over to him with a polite smile.

"She is okay now."

"This is excellent news, Shinigami-san!"

"Please, Lee-san, keep your voice down." A silent finality underscored the kind tone. "I have helped eased the pain and forced her into a deep sleep. She will recover fully in a few days after the damage heals."

Lee watched Hinata for a moment. Her delicate face was still now; not scrunched up in pain like it had been for most of the day. She really did look like she rested peacefully. He exhaled slowly and a tired smile found its way to his face.

"I am sorry, thank you."

"Gaara-taicho said she mumbled something was wrong with her eyes. Can you tell me anything about them?"

Lee shook his head slowly. They were a secret from their entire team. He only knew of their existence because of the physical changes. Had she even utilized them prior to now? It would be impossible for her to not fully train an ability she risked everything to obtain. No, she most definitely had activated her evolved bloodline numerous times.

"I do not know the full extent of her doujutsu. Naruto-kun would know more if he were here. I know the normal Byakugan allows the user to see almost a complete circle around them. It also allows them to see the internal chakra paths. She evolved hers with the help of our village's greatest medic-nin. Unfortunately, what this ultimately achieved I do not know."

"I see."

"Will she be okay from now on?"

"The same problem will occur if she uses them again, and the consequences could be more severe."

"What?" Lee's heart climbed into his throat. "Why?"

"It is likely because the amount of data she could collect was drastically limited by her human body." Mayuri Kurotsuchi strode in with his normal maniacal grin. "You've provided me with an interesting specimen, Unohana. I will enjoy seeing how her brain and ocular tissue relay information to each other. I assume the rest of her body is normal for a Shinigami so I will probably simply remove her head to make storage easier."

The temperature in the room plummeted as Gaara stepped out of the doorway's shadow. His aura soaked the room with a coarse atmosphere as if he'd summoned an invisible sand. Lee wasn't sure when he'd positioned himself in front of the slumbering girl, but his own power swirled through his veins like he'd released the first two of his inner gates. The painted-faced man's smile lacked any humor or kindness. His mere presence made Lee's skin crawl.

"Fellow captain or not, you do anything more than help her, Kurotsuchi, and I will kill you."

"I bold proclamation from the fledgling captain." The mad scientist's own presence crept up and pushed against the sand user. "I hear you used to house a demon in you. Perhaps I should cut you open and see what sort of changes it had on your anatomy."

"Gentlemen." Unohana smiled, but hidden under the kind surface was a frigid sharpness. No power emanated from her, only the certainty of death. "I ask that you calm down so you don't disrupt my patient."

The room settled into an uneasy silence. Gaara and Mayuri eyed each other begrudgingly, until the latter sighed and waved his hand dismissively.

"I am a scientist. I have no time, or interest, in doing something that doesn't further my pursuit of knowledge."

"You do seek to improve things, however." Unohana moved over to Hinata and pulled the sheet up tighter around her neck.

Mayuri's lip stuck out in a strange half-snarl.

"I seek to improve what is interesting or necessary. The fate of some girl with a headache does not fall into either category."

"Then, perhaps I should seek out Kisuke Urahara."

Her smile didn't drop, but the challenge in her voice rang clearly. Mayuri's scowl became angrier.

"I may let her die out of spite."

"I doubt you would want to be labeled a failure."

He let out another sigh and pulled up a stool.

"Wake her up. I need to know what this ability is supposed to actually do."

Lying on his belly under low hanging branches, Naruto struggled to keep his breath soft. His lungs burned and his heart beat painfully against the ground. Nel, wide-eyed in terror, stared at him from her hiding spot ten feet straight ahead. Similarly positioned under the foliage, she kept her smaller arms wrapped around Ichigo in a protective embrace.

The white clad leg of Tesra stepped gently onto the dirt between the two groups.

It may have reduced his energy to near useless levels, but leaving those clones behind and transformed as part of the environment saved them. He knew the pig or someone would show up eventually, and by having the clones both survey and misdirect, bought them a chance to stay out of the Arrancar's path.

Until the bastard got bored and started firing destructive red blasts into the forest at random.

He tried to stay ahead and hidden, but with nothing left in the tank and two bodies to carry, he only scraped enough time to hide when the explosions stopped. He'd put Nel and Ichigo in the safest spot he could find and then moved to the next best position.

Naruto bit down on his thumb and traced the bloody digit against a nearby tree trunk. One Bunshin managed to figure out how to work around the absence of chakra when attempting to construct a barrier around their hunter. It needed a lot of work, and the lack of power made it flimsy as hell. He just needed to get his hands on some ink and paper. Then, he should be able to get the sealing process working as smoothly as when he was alive. For now, he'd have to settle on using blood and semi-working traps.

Tesra's skin just needed to be softer than his master's.

Springing out from cover, Naruto swung his leg up and smashed his shin square into the Arrancar's face. Tesra stumbled back and the blonde gripped his arm, flinging him into the tree with the seal. The text stretched from the seal and ensnared him like a bastardized sealing tag as Naruto snatched his sword away and prepared to stab down.

He froze.

Shinigami create Zanpakuto, a sword that is an extension of their soul.

"This won't hurt you will it." He didn't need to phrase it like a question.

"Why would my own power harm me? If it did anything, it would merely trigger an involuntary Reserreccion."

"That what you call the transformation that turns you into the demon pig?"

"Crude, but not entirely incorrect."

Digging deep, he summoned one clone and passed the blade over.

"Run as far and as fast as you can."

The Bunshin nodded and sprinted away.

"I will still be able to kill you without my Zanpakuto." Tesra leaned forward against the struggling bindings for effect. "You have no means to defeat me."

Naruto bit his lip. Ichigo's sword might work, but if it didn't, Tesra would know exactly where they were. Hell, the creep could be playing captured just for them to appear. Sage mode might work with the forest around him, but it required him to be calm and in control. If he could only pull a little demonic chakra he could power a Rasengan, but even after three attempts nothing bubbled to the surface.

"I'll just pummel you until you stop twitching."

Smoke burst all around them and Naruto felt someone drag him away by the arm.

"Grab your friends and follow me."

Naruto paused for only a moment before following the voice's directions. He scooped up the two and followed the wispy outline out of the smoke. Emerging from the fog, his eyes widened as a shock of dark pink - nearly red - hair bobbed with the woman's every step.

His throat tightened painfully and he nearly stumbled. She made it to this side as well? Kyo hadn't said anything, but maybe he didn't know. Could something that awesome happen in the middle of all this crap?

"Sa- Sakura-?"

The woman glanced over her shoulder, the brown frames of her glasses offsetting her crimson eyes.

"It's Karin."

A sigh filled the office as the hot summer air blew through the open windows carrying in the sounds of shops and civilians at street level. The top sheets from the many stacks of papers were caught in the zephyr and sent sailing across the room, covering the framed pictures resting upon the stands lining the walls. Another sigh as a shadow crept up over the sheets and removed them; the glare of the sun hiding all but the outlines of the people immortalized behind the glass.

"How can paperwork build up so fast just because I'm not here in the mornings? You'd think after a year having a team it wouldn't still be so troublesome."

Rokudaime Shikamaru Nara propped his head up on his fist as the shadow tendrils replaced the papers on their original piles. His attention wandered back over to the pictures, and like so many other times, he found himself moving to stand in front of them. Picking up a random one, a smile flickered across his face.

It was one of his favorites. Temari had her hair down loose and a sweet look on her face as she held his arm. It was taken right after their wedding - before the party that had left over half of Konoha with a week long hangover.

Ever since its destruction, and the tough years spent in the isolated Uzu no Kuni base, whenever there was even the slightest means to celebrate, the village made sure to do so on a grand scale. It's population was small enough after the possessed Kyubi's second attack that most of the people knew each other so what normally was spent between family and friends swelled into a whole village affair.

Someone got married, party in the streets. Someone was going to be a parent, party in the streets. Someone was promoted, party in the

streets. A new type of ramen was put on the menu, party in the streets. The Raikage came to visit, big party in the streets.

And the Raikage visited often.

His eyes darted over to another picture, and a sad half-smile hung on his lips. It was from that night. Honestly, it was a horrible picture. Shino looked like he was going to drop dead, he looked like a mummified pineapple, and Hinata had her sad eyes locked on Naruto, while he and Lee forced smiles. It was dark too and only Naruto's orange stood out. There had been a lot of other pictures that night, funny and heartwarming. But this one was the only one with them as a group. As short lived as it had been, the team had been dear to him.

That night, Naruto made the comment that he should strive to be the next Hokage. At first, Shikamaru couldn't help but think it was a joke. The look in those blue eyes though was nothing but encouraging. For Naruto, who had devoted his entire life to the goal of attaining the title, to have complete faith in him, he couldn't say no to the idea - as troublesome as it was.

He set the picture back down and walked back to his desk.

It had been over seven years now. Konoha was rebuilt and the next generation of ninjas already sat in the academy only a few years shy of genin. Many were already training hard, inspired by the great ninjas who defeated the demon god Madara. His team was an example of that. While it was by no means official, he had been training four specific kids for over a year. The energetic Namikaze twins, the scarily resourceful Naruto Umino, and the cool and strict Hiru Sarutobi were either the team from heaven or hell.

He still hadn't figured out which.

It had been Iruka and Anko's suggestion, which rapidly turned into them convincing all the other parents and telling him he would be their sensei. There wasn't a lot of point arguing with them. Hiru was

his sensei's daughter and a no brainer, and Naruto was joined at the hip with her. The only questionable two were the Namikaze twins, Jiraiya and Tsunade, and their endearing personalities and skills quickly put any doubts aside.

Lacking doubts didn't really quell a lot of the emotions they brought up though.

They had been a surprise. Minato and Kushina were no exceptions to that. Apparently, the necessary preventative measures had been incomplete or something similar to that. Kushina had been hit with a lot of crippling emotions when she found out, more so than anyone else. She spent the first month buried in depression derived from guilt and bounced back to it frequently during her pregnancy. Once the kids were born, she smothered them in love and affection and spent every moment trying to be the best mother she could be.

She never let them see her smile fall while she watched them play. And her and Minato tried to hide their shared looks of pain whenever Naruto Umino's name was mentioned.

There was never a day they failed to visit the memorial stone.

It was a more intense version of what many of them felt, and a question everyone that lost a friend and loved one asked. Does one celebrate life to honor the dead, or remain in sorrow for what the deceased never experiences?

Minato was a little better off than her. He suffered many of the same emotions, but his regret of not being there for Naruto was diminished by his temporary death. Kushina was weighed down by constant regrets, although honestly, Shikamaru read the old reports and notes from the Sandaime about her long term mission. The Uzumaki never really had a choice. Had she attempted to fight it, she would have been dead and Naruto would have wound up in Root under Danzo's control. Only her compliance had allowed the Sandaime to sway the Fire Daimyo's opinions away from giving Danzo her son.

"You're thinking really loud again." Shikamaru looked up as Temari walked in; her stomach slightly swelling under her shirt. "And why are there so many papers? Are you slacking off again?"

When had that stern look of hers become so endearing?

"Team training went longer than normal."

She gave him a look of withering disbelief, but shook her head and gave him a hug.

"You want to go get lunch then?"

"Sure."

A strong wind blew in from the open window, kicking up papers and knocking over the pictures closest to the edge. Shikamaru groaned and dropped his forehead into the nape of her neck.

"You really need to get a paper weight." She lightly pushed him away and moved toward the mess. "Come on, I'll help you get it picked up. Hm, this one will need a new frame."

She held up the group picture, Naruto's face hidden under a spider web of cracks.

"While unsurprising and a little disappointing, my hypothesis is correct. I am interested in seeing exactly how this ocular ability of yours works in conjunction with the enhancements from the second experiment. Are you sure you wouldn't be open to being a permanent test subject? I am very generous for those with unique abilities."

I- um, no, Kurotsuchi-san." Hinata offered a small bow in apology. "I have prior obligations."

"Hm, how disappointing."

Hinata glanced at Lee doing handstand pushups in the corner. His single finger effortlessly supported his entire frame even at the thousandth dip. She was grateful he took her suggestion to heart and burned off his anxious energy. It allowed her to focus entirely on the conversation instead of his worried stares.

Gaara remained at the entrance. Even with his arms folded and his eyes closed while his chin rested on his chest, he radiated a dangerous awareness, ready to lash out the instant something wrong occurred. Kurotsuchi-san seemed well aware of it and almost appeared to relish it. The only thing keeping the scientist in check was Unohana-san's pacifying presence.

"I'm sorry." Hinata clasped her fingers tightly to prevent them from fidgeting. "But what was your hypothesis?"

Mayuri stretched out a long thin finger. The long obsidian finger nail stopped inches in front of her forehead.

"Your brain can't keep up." He retracted his finger and placed it against his skull. "It's not developed enough."

Lee paused in mid dip and the entire room focused on Mayuri.

"For consistency's sake, I will refer to the visual range of this doujutsu as your sphere. When human, your maximum outreach was a sphere with a ten foot diameter." He picked at his ear. "Since it is tied to how much energy you could produce, and the limitations of the human anatomy are now absent, with a few rudimentary calculations I surmise your sphere's base diameter now spans five hundred."

Hinata's mouth dropped slightly. Five hundred feet? It took extreme focus to take in all of the information from the technique when she was alive… more alive.

"How can I have that much energy?"

"The field you generate requires such little energy no one sensed you activate it, which means you unleashed little of your reiryoku. Considering it is not unusual to be aware of a seated officer's fully released reiatsu a mile out, five hundred feet would be simple to accomplish."

"Excuse me, Kurotsuchi-san." Lee let his feet drop to the floor. "What are reiatsu and reiryoku?"

"Reiryoku is the spiritual energy found in chakra." Gaara only bothered to open his eyes. "Reiatsu is the pressure or intensity it creates when in use. It is your power, and as such, its color, shape, or in rare cases, element is entirely unique to you."

"A sufficient, albeit basic, description of the two, not that knowing will correct the issue."

Hinata's lips dipped into a faint frown. Like chakra, she could probably learn to limit the range of her technique to safe levels. Ten feet provided plenty of time in a close range fight given her reflexes - especially with the flexibility she gained from Danzo's experiments. The sphere's limitation did make it difficult to fight with anyone at a distance, but by stretching the sphere into a single direction she could sweep it around her almost instantly to detect and then focus on a far away opponent. It was merely her own lack of experience that caused her problems in her final fight.

Did she need to though? They were no longer ninja. The sword on Gaara's back showed he had taken to the role of a Shinigami, but was that his choice? Did she need to make the same choice? Would she even serve a viable role?

"Hinata-san, are you still with us?" Unohana asked

"I am trying to wrap my head around all of this." She sucked in a breath. "I believe I should be able to control my technique now that I am aware of the power difference."

"Incorrect." Mayuri shook his head. "In a normal technique, certainly, you can control how much Reiryoku is invested in it to decide its power. However, because this ability is tied directly into your biology, you would have to limit your reiatsu. I forget not everyone can make the same jumps in logic as I."

"What are you saying, Kurotsuchi-san?"

"I said five hundred feet barely required reiryoku. Barely drawing on your energy means you are not generating reiatsu. By unleashing your reiatsu your sphere will expand to match its power."

Hinata's heart beat quickened.

"You're saying five hundred feet is my minimum?"

"Correct! And since you do not fully understand, reiatsu is more than simple pressure. It destabilizes an opponent, can assist in repelling weaker attacks, and fortifies your own physical capabilities. Even when it lacks a visible aura, reiatsu is directly proportionate to your battle strength. It is your power in action." His head tilted to the side. "In case you don't fully grasp your situation, you will naturally release your reiatsu when you fight and when you do your sphere will expand."

Hinata forced herself to swallow the dryness in her mouth.

"So if I have to fight, I can't use my eyes."

Mayuri's eye lit up with glee as his grin widened.

"That or you could let me tinker with you."

The sun lazily sunk into the horizon, painting the sky in orange and red as Naruto followed Karin out of the forest into a small farming field housing a small shack at its center. A giant of a man leaned

over a modest fire pit as he stirred the contents of a kettle. Naruto's stomach growled as the aroma drifted over to him.

It could be socks at this point.

The majority of Ichigo's legs dragged in the dirt. It had taken all of Naruto's remaining strength to just keep them moving forward. Thankfully, Nel was happy to walk along with the Karin woman, and thankfully, their rescuer easily stayed a dozen steps ahead of Tesra. Often turning at random, even doubling back a few times, she led them far away from the Arrancar like she knew exactly where he was at all times.

"Get him into the hut." Karin led Nel over to a stool by the fire. "I'll start healing him up. Jugo, can you give him a hand?"

The giant carefully scooped Ichigo up and carried him in before Naruto could even offer to help. The weight finally off his shoulders, Naruto's legs gave out and he barely caught himself with his shaky hands. Sweat dripped from his face onto the dirt.

"Thanks, big guy." Naruto sucked in a deep breath and looked up at Karin. "And thank you."

"It's alright, Naruto." Karin knelt down in front of him. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Um, I think seven years. It was definitely before I died?" He sat back on his knees then blinked. "Wait, how do you know who I am?"

She adjusted her glasses.

"I'll explain everything tomorrow."

Author's Notes:

This chapter took much longer than I had planned. Originally, many parts were too dialogue heavy and other sections didn't flow well under the weight of the information. I tried to make it natural and not an information dump, but the decision of if I was successful will really come down to all of you.

Should be able to be on a consistent schedule with longer chapter from here on out.

Happy belated New Year as well.

Sighted

Disclaimer: I do own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 4

In the beginning, sleep didn't come easily. He would wake up in a cold sweat, wondering how badly Suna smoldered in the aftermath of Shukaku's rampage. It always took a moment for him to remember he no longer jailed the one tail. However, every slumber lasted a little longer, and in a few weeks, he slept through the entire night. Only the destruction of his village brought back the insomnia, and that passed with the destruction of Danzo's army.

Tonight was the first night in four years he couldn't sleep.

Mayuri's lab detected the reiatsu signature of a powerful Arrancar enter Soul Society far west of the Seireitei city walls. That alone warranted attention, yet, what bothered him was the two presences they detected arriving an hour earlier. Scanners identified one as the substitute Shinigami, Ichigo Kurosaki. The twelfth division could not identify the other one, but Mayuri pointed out it possessed a similar demonic taint to his own - only significantly more potent.

While his beast ranked the lowest of the tailed beasts, the demonic quality of Shukaku's chakra never felt different from the others he'd encountered as Kazekage. The Kyubi, infamous as a being of pure hatred, was the sole exception, and from what Lee and Hinata described, Madara's transformation did as well.

He desperately wanted to believe the reiatsu belonged to the former. The looming war with Aizen provided enough difficulties without adding in a crazed Uchiha with the powers of all ten beasts

combined. The fact that whoever arrived did so with Ichigo Kurosaki gave him some hope.

Regardless, it made him too anxious to sleep. He wanted to set out now and face whatever awaited him on the outskirts of Rukongai. The Captain-Commander ordered him to wait until morning and see if more Arrancar could be detected. The aged leader didn't want him falling into a trap, and Gaara respected both the logic and the man. He would wait - restlessly staring up at the stars filling the night sky.

"Gaara-san, may I speak with you for a while?" Lee leapt up onto the roof next to him. "I would like to ask you some questions and make a request."

"Certainly."

"Thank you." Lee sat down crossed legged, then joined Gaara's stargazing. "It is amazing how similar the sky is between our world and this afterlife."

"Yes. I've always found the similarities between the worlds to be comforting whenever I worry about Temari and those I can no longer protect. You could say it makes me feel less… lonesome." Gaara brushed the feeling away. "What is your request?"

"I wish to go with you to find Naruto and his companion."

"We don't know if it is Naruto."

"All the more reason for me to travel with you." Lee clenched his fists in his pants. "Please, I will not be a burden."

"It takes time to get used to your body as a soul, an issue potentially even more complex due to your previous body's inability to use chakra."

"Gaara-san, I could not form chakra because my spiritual energy was too great to balance."

The ex-Suna-nin's normally deadpan expression perked up in surprise.

"Given your physical prowess, I find that difficult to believe."

"As did I. However, the findings came directly from Tsunade-sama herself."

"Fair enough."

Lee bowed his head.

"Gaara-san, I know there is much I need to learn about this body and its relation to my powers. However, I cannot sit around while my friend and teammate may be in danger."

Gaara studied him carefully. The power he'd subconsciously released when Mayuri threatened Hinata hinted at a much deeper well of power. He was also skilled enough he shouldn't die if they were temporarily split up. It wouldn't hurt, and besides, Lee would probably follow him anyway. At least this way he could prevent the taijutsu user from causing a ruckus or getting lost.

"I will let you die if you can't pull your own weight."

Lee let out a short laugh.

"You say that with far too much kindness for me to believe it, Gaara-san."

The hint of a smile tugged at Gaara's lips. It was odd to speak so freely with the man he'd once almost killed. Granted, the same happened with Naruto, but the situation with Lee remained different. His actions against him had been vindictive and nearly ruined his life - a fate honestly more cruel than death for someone who had overcome so much. Granted, it worked out in the end, but conversing on friendly terms still felt strange.

"You've changed, Gaara-san."

"Perhaps you merely perceive me differently." Gaara shifted his weight so he could look out over the city. Some Shinigami walked hand in hand while others stumbled out of the small shops laughing with a drunken blush. "What are your questions?"

"I would like to know what happened to you after your… death. However, I am sure such a youthful tale requires time. So instead, do you know how you came to this place?"

"No. And until you two arrived, I have found no one else from our world, and I spent much of my time seeing if my brother came to this side."

"So you have no clues or memories?"

"Not until I materialized as a soul." His eyes narrowed as a subconscious chill ran up his spine. "No, that is incorrect. I do remember feeling someone standing over my spirit as it slept."

"You will have to explain these terms to me, but I felt something similar to that as well. What did the presence feel like to you?"

"Evil."

Toshiro Hitsugaya was the youngest Captain in the history of the Gotei 13. Barely a teenager in appearance, he had crafted his personality to be serious and emulate a man far beyond his years. He detested childish things or having such things equated to him. Cold as the icy powers he wielded, people respected him for his hardworking attitude and level-headed maturity.

They were wise enough to remain quiet about his lack of height.

However, even through years of meticulous shaping of his persona, he could not keep the surprised look off his face, or hide the youthful emotions in his turquoise irises.

"Commander, what do you mean?"

"I meant what was said, Captain Hitsugaya. You will replace me as the Commander of the Gotei 13." The old man rolled his neck with a few pops as if emphasizing his age. "I have served since its creation, and to this day no Shinigami has been able to surpass me. Were something to happen in this war that would render me unfit to lead, a dangerous emptiness would be left that future enemies could exploit."

Regaining his demeanor, Hitsugaya's lips dipped into a frown.

"While I strive to improve, I am hundreds, if not thousands, of years from even approaching you, sir."

Yamamoto nodded and stood. Clasping his hands behind his back, he left the gnarled cane against his desk and walked out to the balcony of his office. The midnight moonlight soaked down into his uniform as the city below sparkled with the same vibrancy as sand along a beach.

"Immediately upon Kisuke Urahara's exile, all records in his division, the Twelfth Division, were confiscated for review. At the time, we feared he had been delving into hollowfication research and did not want anyone else to come across it. However, Urahara's contributions to our technologies were without equal, so recklessly destroying anything we came across would be unwise."

"You sorted the information personally then?"

"Yes, I should have found it odd that I never found any further information on hollowfication beyond what Aizen submitted as evidence." The aged Shinigami trailed off for a moment, as if past regrets were playing out behind his closed eyelids. "Regardless, most of the information was handed back to the division and continued to be developed under the direction of Mayuri Kurotsuchi."

"You said most."

"Did you ever find it odd, that when Urahara arrived to assist your group battle the Arrancar in the human world a short while ago, he toyed with an Espada using only Shikai?"

Toshiro remained silent as he moved to his feet. The Espada were the strongest ten Arrancar in Aizen's growing army. He, a captain, had been forced to use his Bankai and still struggled to keep up with his opponents. The members in his team lacked the skill of a second release and were completely overwhelmed. Yet, Urahara effortlessly handled the giant powerhouse named Yammy.

"I had assumed he was simply stronger. I have never seen anything beyond the Shikai of Ukitake, Kyoraku, or you. You three are strong enough to not need it."

"Yes, we are stronger due to rare Zanpakuto and highly refined skills. But the primary cause is due to hundreds of years more growth than the rest of the Gotei 13. Urahara, while he possesses the former two, has only slightly more years than many of you current captains."

"You believe he developed a means of accelerating his growth."

Toshiro did not feel the need to phrase it as a question.

"I have proof that is what he did. It is no secret Mayuri Kurotsuchi has been able to modify his Zanpakuto. Urahara developed the original procedure for his blade."

"Kurotsuchi just alters his sword's poisons and effects. Nothing he does increases his overall power."

"Urahara did, and the improvements were not limited to his sword." Toshiro paused behind the hunched over man, the breeze blowing through his spiky white hair. "As you know, we limit our powers when we enter the human world to diminish the impact our presence makes. High amounts of reiatsu can awaken powers or even harm humans and others with less spiritual power. He theorized that by bathing a sedated soul and its Zanpakuto in raw reishi for a constant

and prolonged period of time, their powers would grow significantly faster than what simple time and experience could provide."

"You believe he did this on himself."

"Given the detail of his notes, and his power, I am certain of it."

"Then why has this not been utilized?"

"Human's gain health out under the sun, but too much of it will cause them to die. Unless a soul is already powerful or in tight control of the power they possess, the influx of spiritual particles destabilize the soul and either cripple, or kill, the recipient. While it is true many Shinigami could survive, most would be left a shell of their former selves. I believe even Urahara himself spent a great deal of time recovering. Kurotsuchi surmises that the only way to diminish the negative aspects of the technology would be to place the recipient into a near death state and significantly reduce the frequency by which the reishi is administered."

Toshiro's face remained blank as a knot formed in the pit of his stomach.

"The process sounds like it would take a long time."

"Over three hundred years is the current estimate."

"Aizen's attack could be at anytime."

"And whether we are victorious or defeated, regaining Seireitei's strength in three hundred years is far better than hoping others fill the gap." Yamamoto glanced over his shoulder and cracked an eye the color of a burning ember. "You are still young. Your powers, while impressive, are incomplete. You wield a dragon as your Zanpakuto, a rarity among rarities. In time, you will surpass me with proper training."

Try as he might, Toshiro's jaw clenched at the idea of sitting the fight out. He remembered his oldest and most cherished friend, her blank eyes punctuating the shock on her face as her blood dripped down Aizen's blade.

The traitor had been her captain, her idol. Before he left, Aizen toyed with her, stabbed her, and had done it with a smile on his face. Then, the man had the arrogance to call the attempted murder an act of mercy. Even now that she was physically recovered, her mind remained fractured between the truth and her own infatuation and denial of what her beloved captain did. No one deserved to cut the traitor down more than Hinamori, but with her unable to, it fell to him. And, no one wanted to do it more than him.

"Protocol 00 was designed to ensure the survival of Seireitei and the Shinigami in the event of a cataclysm. Those selected are placed in a state of hibernation in a secured vault until a selected time. You, and a few others, will be the only ones to undertake Urahara's method and the subliminal training accompanying it. The rest will simply sleep until the time comes for them to awaken and follow the orders of those trained; the new captains led by you."

"Commander, I must refuse-"

A faint wisp of power floated through the air like the hint of smoke in the wind.

"I am sorry, Captain Hitsugaya. You cannot."

The expansive hall almost shown with a silver hue. Ornate columns held up a marble ceiling, allowing for the walls to be mostly absent and show a blue sky leading forever into nothing. She sat in a similarly colored chair centered in the middle of the floor. Another was stationed directly across from the small table in front of her. The only other object was what her host called a piano, positioned at the edge of the room.

Her host shuffled a deck of cards as he walked over and took the seat across from her. His white hair framed a thin intricate scar running through his left eye and down his cheek. He offered her a smile and placed the deck down on the table, tucking his gloved left hand in the folds of his black overcoat.

"I really appreciate you accepting my request to play cards, Hinata-san." He cut the deck. "It's been forever since I had a chance to play with anyone."

"I don't mind. Although, I am still trying to understand all the rules. Thank you for being patient with me, Walker-san."

He shook his head with a chuckle and began to distribute them evenly.

"I'm really impressed you still wanted to learn right now after everything else I told you. I mean, most people would need time to accept we're talking as spirits right now. And again, it's Allen."

She nodded slowly as she picked up the cards. The concept of an inner world or mindscape wasn't too difficult for her to understand. Naruto-kun once explained it to her when talking about his relationship with the Kyubi. The idea of it helped, considering that where they were seemed abstract, since the hall sat in an endless blue sky.

Besides, she knew Kurotsuchi-san already put her to sleep, and was most likely cutting into her head right now.

"Do you have any questions about what I've told you so far?" He studied his cards. "Do you have any eights?"

"Go fish. I believe I understand the basic concept." She watched as he nimbly removed the top card. "We share the same mindscape, and you are my Zanpakuto spirit. You know all about me, but for some reason, I am unable to gain your memories. Our situation is unique because you are another person instead of a part of me."

"Yes. I will explain more about how my strength will be added to yours once you find my physical form. It's your turn."

"Do you have any fives?" He blinked then shot her a mistrusting glare. "You're not using you powers are you, Hinata-san?"

"No, Allen-san."

He passed her three cards.

"Are you nervous about what is happening to your soul right now?"

"I cannot be nervous when I have no choice."

"You could have told him no."

"Even if I do not join the Shinigami, I will help someone in trouble. I know I will activate my eyes if my attacker is strong, and I will do it without thinking." She closed her eyes and smiled at him. "Besides, I won't leave my team alone. I won't have Naruto-kun fight without me."

Allen rested all his cards down on the table as a frown tugged at his pale lips.

"Your and Naruto's future was cut short like mine was." A humorless chuckle escaped from his mouth. "Considering everything, maybe, I never even had one."

"Allen-san?"

"There is a man lurking somewhere out in the darkness." Tears pricked the corners of his eyes. "I don't know what his new plans are. I don't know when he will unleash them, but I do know you will get caught up in them whether you choose to fight or not. Hinata-san, the gray man ascended to powers beyond what we thought possible. He surpassed death, and he killed my future. You must fear him. You must fear the Earl of Millennium."

Lee slid into a low stretch as they prepared to leave. He peered out through the city's open West gate. Far beyond the districts, Naruto and his ally were fighting against a powerful foe. The thought of seeing his friend again filled him with excitement. No, this entire world with all its uniqueness filled him with excitement. While he missed the village dearly, there was so much promise in this new life. After their noble sacrifice against Madara, they were blessed with a second chance.

"Are you prepared, Gaara-san? I do not want to leave Naruto on his own any longer than needed."

"Agreed." The captain signaled for the guardian to begin opening the gigantic gate. "If we run at top speed, we should make it to their last location in under four hours."

"Gaara-taicho!"

Lee spun out of his stretch toward the female voice calling out to his current teammate. Long and wavy orange hair twisted and fluttered in the air as she landed in front of them. Lee's mouth dropped an unnoticeable amount as she stood to her full height. A light pink scarf draped over her shoulders, offsetting the standard Shinigami uniform, which she left loose to an almost indecent degree, given her… generous build.

"Yes, Rangiku-san?" Gaara remained stock still with his arms folded in front of him. "Is there news from the Commander?"

She stuck her lip out in a pout and sighed.

"Why do you think every time I come to see you it's on someone else's orders?"

"Because it would be rude to ask what you wanted money for."

"I've never asked you for money."

"You invite me to drink with you, and I always end up paying. It is the same thing."

Lee blinked as he glanced from one to the other. It may be his imagination, but did Gaara have a slight teasing tone to his voice? It was so light, even unusual, he couldn't be sure. Certainly, he was not close with the ex-Kazekage, but the conversation definitely carried a different feel than the redhead's normal interactions.

"What I was going to ask, Gaara-taicho." She playfully flicked a loose strand over her shoulder. "Was if you wanted to spar when you got back. It's been a few months."

"It depends on what happens after this mission. I can make no promises."

She huffed and looked to the side.

"You've said the same thing for the past month." A sly smile crept up on her face and she turned back to him. "I'll pay for drinks afterward. I'll even wear one of those dresses you helped me pick out from the human world."

"That- isn't necessary." He coughed lightly into his fist. "And the shopping was because you knew it was my first trip into the human world. I had no choice but to follow you everywhere."

"Come on, you know you had fun."

Gaara cracked a small smile and nodded, until he caught Lee staring at him and the eternal deadpan snapped back into place.

"We need to be going. I will do my best to make time for a sparring session."

Her smile widened ear from ear and she clapped her hands in front of her.

"Thank you." She began to walk away with a wave. "Good luck on your mission. You'll have to introduce me to all these friends of yours that everyone is talking about when you get back."

She leapt up onto the nearest rooftop and took off toward the center of the city.

A face splitting grin slowly appeared on Lee's face as Gaara turned with a sigh. The Captain paused, an almost uncomfortable expression threatening to overcome the stoic neutrality of his features.

"Not a word."

Lee's teeth started to show as the grin deepened.

"Yosh, Gaara-san." Lee's voice stayed at its normal volume. He spun on his heel and started for the exit. "Yosh."

Naruto stretched his arms over his head, letting out a yawn as the morning sunlight warmed his face. A good night's sleep always recharged his batteries, and the stew from last night really hit the spot. He crossed his fingers in front of his chest.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu." A hundred clones popped into existence. He grinned and pointed a finger at the group. "I want my control back to useful levels by noon."

The mini-army shouted in confirmation and took off into the forest. While they worked on that, he could focus on getting some of his techniques back in working condition and see if every hand seal worked with this bod- soul. Understanding his physical limits was a must, but he could test that while surveying the area. While he and Ichigo needed to get to the city as soon as the kid was able to, it would probably a few days so he might as well learn about his surroundings..

Naruto started walking around the field with his hands folded behind his head. There were a lot of gardens, far more than two people could eat - even if one of them was a giant. Jugo stayed pretty quiet around him, but seemed to get along with animals really well. Birds kept fluttering down and landing on his shoulders all through dinner.

He travelled around the back of the shack; a creature lunging for him so fast he stumbled back and landed on his butt. It landed on his chest and growled in his face, the hot animal breath causing his nose to scrunch up as his eyes closed.

"You have a pretty fancy costume there, Kyubi."

"That's not the stupid fox, it's his flesh prison." Another creature landed to the left of his face. "Went and got yourself killed eh, blondie?"

"Wha-" Naruto cracked his eye open. "Hey, you're that crazy tanuki of Gaara's!"

"I'm not Gaara's! I'm Shukaku, the wielder of the ultimate defense."

"You notice how he didn't dispute the crazy part?" Naruto looked for the source of the voice and spotted a red ape with four tails crouched on a log. "Let him up, Gyuki. He's just got Kurama's power."

"I'm not so sure." The eight tailed ox crawled off. "I suppose that arrogant malevolence of his isn't on the surface at least."

Naruto sat up and blinked as more beasts came out from an additional room connected to the back of the shack. One, two, three - all of the tailed demons but the Kyubi were present… and shorter. They stood around knee height and held what he assumed were their original forms. The one tail at least looked the same as when he fought it.

"They arrived shortly after Karin and I did." Jugo spoke as he came up behind him. "They are no longer demons, just very intelligent animals."

"We still need to come up with a new word for us." The ape crossed his arms over his chest and puffed it out. "Animals seems derogatory given who we are."

"Wh- how - I mean… what the hell?"

"That was our reaction as well." The ox, Gyuki, laid down in the sunlight. "We didn't think there was an afterlife for us. Guess some god decided we deserved it after the end we had."

"Just tell me you killed that bastard, Madara!" Shukaku slammed its paws against the ground. "People thought absorbing blood through my sand was bad, but at least I didn't eat them alive. Seriously though, you kill him?"

Naruto glanced down at his hand. He'd seen Madara pulled in before he did. The technique had expanded instantly so there was no way for the last Uchiha to warp out.

"Yeah." He clenched his fist. "I got him."

"Come on." Jugo motioned for Naruto to follow. "I made breakfast."

Naruto took one last look as the beasts moved into the forest.

"So what's your story?" Naruto focused his attention back to his guide. "Your friend knew who I was."

"All of Orochimaru's forces knew who you were."

Naruto froze as adrenaline pooled into his bloodstream. Wait, no, they had more than enough opportunities to kill him already. They didn't mean him harm, or at least, they wanted something from him.

"Jugo, you ruined the big reveal." Karin put her hands on her hips as they came to the front. "Now, he's not going to listen to anything we say."

"Sorry."

She rubbed her forehead as he sat down and handed out breakfast. With a sigh, she joined him and motioned for Naruto to sit.

"It's alright, Jugo. Probably better we get the hard truth out of the way so we aren't hiding anything." She flashed a smile at the blonde. "You haven't run away or attacked so you must believe in us a little."

"Orochimaru did say he wasn't very observant."

"Orochimaru was probably too busy humping Sasuke to keep up to date information on me." Naruto grabbed a plate and nodded at Karin. "I am surprised you saved me though, figure the snake would've had you guys hating my guts."

"Not at all. Orochimaru-sam- he was fascinated by your progression, and excited by the prospect of you, a fellow Sannin's disciple, facing Sasuke-kun."

Naruto shoved a mouthful of food in his mouth. He didn't want to talk about Sasuke. It would dredge up all the mistakes he made regarding his first friend. It would only lead to even more topics that broke his heart.

"What do you two want to know? Info is why you saved me right?"

"Did anyone ever stop my body?" Jugo never looked up from his plate, but worry washed over his expression. "Danzo sealed my humanity to unleash the full terror of my cursed blood. My last conscious image were Konoha's walls. I can only imagine the monster I became."

Naruto almost shot to his feet. He was that monster? That thing nearly killed Hinata. The damage I caused allowed Danzo to… he wouldn't have had to kill her. She wouldn't have had to deal with what it felt like being a monster.

"That was you?" Naruto's voice barely surpassed a whisper.

"No, what attacked your village was Jugo's power, completely unrestrained by the gentle person you're talking to now. Danzo was the monster. He drained Jugo to a lifeless husk to build an army of monsters." Karin shook as she clenched her eyes shut. "That soulless bastard sealed Jugo away so his greatest nightmare materialized. Jugo never wanted to hurt anyone, but Danzo didn't care. That cruel man did anything to get what he wanted… anything."

Jugo put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze as she silently wept. Naruto watched for a moment as bad memories twisted his stomach up into a knot. The war hawk lacked any compassion for even his allies. He could only imagine what Danzo put them through.

"I stopped it and then I stopped Danzo for good with the help of my friends. We took damage, Suna more than anyone, but we won."

Karin wiped at her eyes with her sleeve.

"Good, that's good."

Naruto forced a smile on his face. They didn't need to revisit bad memories any more than he did.

"So you guys were reborn as souls, found each other, and decided to shack up and raise tailed beasts then?"

Jugo shook his head with a horrified expression while Karin laughed.

"What are you looking so upset for, Jugo?" She punched him lightly in the arm. "I'm a phenomenal catch."

"Thank you, Naruto Uzumaki." Jugo bowed his head. "Thank you for ending the evil within me."

"So your… curse didn't come over with you to this side?"

"Thankfully, no. I am a simple farmer now, able to live in peace with nature and all of its creatures."

"Good." Naruto dove back into his food. "This is really good."

"Thank you."

"Naruto." Karin almost appeared hesitant. "How did you die? Were you an old man or was there an enemy more powerful than you?"

Naruto paused chewing. There was another topic he wanted to stay far away from. Even though they won, it didn't feel like a victory. Heck, most of his fights in the end never felt like victories.

"Madara Uchiha, I killed him but it took the lives of me, my sensei, and two of my closest friends." He swallowed down the bitterness. "Apparently, I've been dead for seven years but only materialized yesterday. How about you two?"

"We found ourselves here about six years ago without knowing how long it took to arrive. We moved way out beyond Rukongai because it was more peaceful."

"Rukongai?"

"It is a part of Soul Society. Seireitei, the city of the Shinigami, is in the center. Rukongai is a series of districts that encircles the city and the farther from the city the worse the districts get, with eighty being the worst. We're past that, safe and isolated by miles and miles of forest."

"Wow, so this place is pretty big. Did you guys figure everything out alone or did your Zanpakuto spirits help?"

Karin and Jugo shared a confused look.

"We don't have Zanpakuto or other spirits." Karin readjusted her glasses. "You do?"

"I just have the annoying spirit right now. Supposedly, his physical form is waiting for me in this Seireitei place."

Karin shook her head with a disbelieving smile.

"The reports were right, you are unpredictable."

Renji Abarai always had a problem of aiming higher than he should. His captain once said he was like a monkey trying to capture the moon. It'd gotten him into trouble more than once, and he'd barely escaped death more than a few times. There probably wouldn't be any way out this time.

When Ichigo's presence disappeared, he knew they were screwed. As one of the only two left standing from their group, he shifted the mission's goal from rescue to escape. They needed to get everyone out of Hueco Mundo. He'd distracted his opponent and sent Uryu Ishida out to gather Rukia and Chad. Ichigo's friend was far faster, while he was more durable.

Now, he stood baring his fangs at his enemy whose strength easily overwhelmed his own. Blood matted his red hair and dripped down off his chin as he fought to keep his sword up in front of him. They may have been able to defeat the eighth Espada if the creep hadn't ran off. But this guy, he clearly outmatched him and hadn't even needed to draw his sword yet.

The fourth Espada, Ulquiorra Cifer, pointed two fingers at him. Renji leapt to the side as a green blast of energy decimated the spot.

"Why do you struggle, Shinigami?" The Arrancar emerged from the smoke. "Surely, you feel your death stands before you. Do you think with your menial powers you can delay me from reaching your comrades?"

"Try this menial power on for size. Ban-"

Ulquiorra disappeared, the air around him reverberating from the sheer speed of his step. Renji's words died as the Espada shoved his hand through his heart. Gritting his teeth, the Shinigami gripped his Zanpakuto as tightly as he could and slashed down. Ulquiorra effortlessly knocked the blade to the side and flung Renji by the fatal wound in his chest.

The sixth division lieutenant crashed face down on a pile of rubble. Shakily reaching into the hem of his Shihakusho, he pulled out a small box. They understood the risks coming to their enemy's headquarters. The exiled Shinigami, Kisuke Urahara, made arrangements in case things were worse than they could handle, and provided him with an emergency contact device.

Sucking in a shallow breath, he held it up in front of his mouth.

"Can you hear me, Urahara? Did Ishida manage to retrieve Chad and Rukia?" His vision began to tunnel. "Urahara, are they safe?"

He coughed up more blood and his body began to feel weightless.

"Yes." Static crackled to life over the other end. "I have successfully managed to retrieve them. Ishida-kun is bringing them home as we speak." The voice paused for a moment. "Abarai-kun, do you have you have any message you want me to pass on."

Renji closed his eyes as the box slipped from his fingers. What more could he say, and who could he say it to? All the goals he would never obtain seemed like a distant desire now. All the friends he would no longer laugh with now lived on to fight for the future. He would die on the battlefield for the sake of his companions. There

was no greater privilege than that. His only regret is that he would die alone, without taking his killer with him and helping his comrades achieve victory.

"Abarai-kun, are you still there?"

"Tell them to win, Urahara. Tell everyone to wi-"

Ulquiorra stabbed his blade through the back of Renji's skull, permanently silencing him.

Tsunade Namikaze scratched the back of her head as her younger twin meticulously dragged another kunai upon the whet stone for the hundredth time that hour. He always got so stubborn about this stuff.

"You know it doesn't matter how sharp they are if the ring is what always hits the target."

"I want them to stick even if my throw is off."

"You grind them much more and they'll be toothpicks." She crouched down next to him, grabbing one out of the pile he'd already sharpened. "I still don't get why you don't just stick with shuriken. You never miss with them."

"Dad says kunai are more versatile."

"Do you even know what that word means?"

"I know it's a good thing. Lots of ninja talk about it." He held the kunai up in front of his nose, squinting his bright blue eyes. "I heard Mom crying last night."

"Yeah."

She'd heard it coming from the kitchen too. Mom never cried loud or in front of them, but every once in a while they'd catch her. When they asked, she would say it was the onions she had cut up for

tomorrow's meal and hold up a bowl of them. Then she'd smile and send them back to bed with a hug.

They always had a lot of onions around the time their brother fought Madara Uchiha and didn't come home.

Jiraiya threw the blade at the closest tree and frowned when it hit flat and bounced off. He tugged lightly at his spiky red hair. Even if he was too serious for a temper tantrum, she knew he was getting angry trying to figure out what kept going wrong. He did everything the adults said to do.

"Mom says you'll go bald if you keep pulling at your hair like that." She hit her fist against her palm as her face lit up in realization. "Why don't you just tie a bunch of kunai together? You can throw them like a shuriken, but still have that versatility thing."

"Maybe." He flopped on his back and stared up at the cloudy sky. "If I learn how to make jutsu like Dad and Nichan, maybe I can think of one that always keeps the point in front."

"They could be defective." Tsunade grabbed another two by their rings and flung them at the same tree. Sinking in deep, the three formed a straight line vertically up the center of the tree. She grinned sheepishly. "Or not."

He groaned loudly.

"I can't believe you can already throw three. It's bad enough Hiru can do it." He tilted his head to look at her. "Even Naru can get two at once."

"And none of us can do tree climbing yet, which you do easy."

"You'd think I could do at least one though."

Her round face puffed up and she tightened the bandana holding her blonde hair in place.

"Alright, Naru's dad always says Nichan would stay up all night until he got something down." She stomped over to a thicker tree to the right. "We're not going home until I can walk up this tree and you can get at least one kunai in."

"But Tsunade!" He shot to his feet, almost stepping on his pile of Kunai. "It will be dark soon and the other kids have said they've been seeing… you know."

"Those chickens are just jumping at cat shadows." She steeled her storm blue eyes on the tree. "Invisible monsters with glowing yellow eyes and weird growls don't exist."

He gave his hair one last tug and sighed.

"You're probably right." He bent down and grabbed a kunai. "Make sure you don't overdo it and blow up this tree like the one you did yesterday."

"I didn't blow it up! I… just put a little crack in it."

"Little like the valley where Nichan fought the traitor."

Naruto silently walked into the small shack and knelt down next to Ichigo. Nel was outside pestering Jugo as he worked in the fields while Karin had left for the closest district with a functioning shop. She wanted to get some more bandages and make a few other trades with the surplus crops. She'd used up their supply getting him patched up.

He doubted Ichigo's breathing could be so much better because of a bunch of bandages, but hey, whatever. The kid was on the mend. Although for the life of him, he couldn't figure out why his trench coat had changed into something similar to his black kimono, or why the black daito now looked like a giant kitchen knife.

"How long have I been out?" Ichigo groaned and cracked open an eye. "It feels like we're in Soul Society."

"Yeah, the air is definitely more lively." Naruto grabbed a cup of water and helped Ichigo sit up. "How much do you remember?"

"Things kind of flash through my head." He took the cup from Naruto and sipped at it. "I mostly blacked out when- where's Orihime?"

Naruto felt his throat tighten as panic set in Ichigo's brown eyes. The kid went through hell, the friends who went with him might be dead, and he ended up with nothing to show for it. He'd been there with a dead Hinata in his arms. If old lady Chiyo - it worked out, and hopefully the same would happen for Ichigo.

"Nel opened a portal, something she called a Garganta. We dove in but the angry pork roast managed to fling her out."

"You left her?" Ichigo grabbed Naruto by his collar and yanked it roughly. "You left her behind with them!"

"You were almost dead. I barely had enough energy to stand let alone fight. Nel gave us an exit and we took it. Orihime was with us until Tesra dove in after us and tossed her out. By then, there was nothing I could do in the freefall."

"That's a load of crap! You talked about being some ninja and how you were going to help me save everyone." Ichigo's body shook as his fist clenched tighter and his knuckles whitened. "She could be dead because you ran away!"

"Did you notice how the Arrancar acted around her during the battle or were you too busy getting your ass kicked to see anything?" He snatched Ichigo's wrist and easily pulled his hand away. "They had multiple chances to hurt or kill her. Yeah, they toyed with her and got a little rough, but nothing bad enough to even cause a bruise. Tesra could have let her stay in the Garganta and then have killed all of us at the same time. Instead, he made sure to recover her."

"You're making a pretty big assumption."

"Nnoitra was a sadist. Look at what he did to Nel. If he was allowed to harm Orihime, he would have done it in front of you so you would suffer in your own helplessness." He let go of Ichigo and refilled the cup. "Ichigo, they aren't allowed to hurt her."

Ichigo jaw tightened as his gaze cast downward on his heavily bandaged torso.

"And you realized all this in the middle of that fight?"

"I had a teacher beat the skill of observation into my head." Naruto repressed a shudder. "This one time he made a maze with clues inside a toad's stomach. I had to find all the clues and hints while trying to not be digested or killed by traps."

Freakin Ero-Sensei .

Ichigo faced him completely with a stern gaze.

"You swear you didn't abandon her."

"My first teacher believed that someone who abandoned their comrades were less than trash. If I thought for a second she would have been harmed, I would have made Nel send me right back into that desert."

Ichigo searched his face for any sign of dishonesty. Taking the cup, the orange haired youth resumed studying his lap.

"Your teacher sounds like a nutcase."

"He was, but I wouldn't have accomplished what I did without his training."

Ichigo downed the water.

"You had some crazy moves during the fight." He set the cup on the floor and lied back down. "Are those normal techniques for your world?"

"Some are crazier, and all of them are cool, but mine are pretty unique. It helped I had a demon sealed in me."

"This world of yours sounds insane."

"Yeah." Naruto laughed. "But it was home."

"Did you come here by choice? You seemed pretty confused when we first met."

"I- I died taking down someone who threatened to put the entire world under an eternal illusion." Naruto shook his head. "What about you? What's your story?"

"I'm a just a substitute Shinigami who gained his powers through sheer luck."

"Substitute?"

"Yeah, I still have a human body and live like any normal fifteen year old when I'm in the living world. I just have my soul removed when I need to fight."

"And you say my world is insane."

"I guess it's what you get used to."

"Are there a lot of people like you?"

"No. I first gained Shinigami powers when Rukia transferred hers over to me to save my family. Long story short, I eventually awakened my own and she reclaimed hers." He grinned. "I'm sure it sounds strange having a school kid fight monsters."

"You're still in school? Man and the academy instructors called me slow."

"You're supposed to be in school until eighteen, jackass."

"Eighteen! We graduate from the academy at twelve and that's still way too lon-"

"Naruto!" Karin burst in through the front door, her chest heaving as sweat traced along every worry created crease on her face. "We have a problem."

Naruto shot up to his feet.

"What is it?"

"It's that Arrancar who was hunting you. He's headed this way." She cast a glance at Ichigo. "Now that the kid is awake he's like a beacon with how much reiatsu he's putting off."

"How can you tell? I don't sense the pig."

"Detecting people has always been my specialty." She sucked in a calming breath and readjusted her glasses. "We can't move Ichigo fast enough to get away. We need a plan."

Naruto frowned. So wherever Ichigo went, Tesra could find them? Then the best bet would be to set up an ambush using him as bait. It should at least allow Karin and the other two time to get away. His control was better so he shouldn't burn through his reserves as badly as before, and the clones had yet to dispel, which would give another boost.

"You or Jugo take Nel and the tailed beasts. Go find someplace far enough away you can safely hide. I'll do my best to get him away from the crops once he shows up. After I lead him away, whoever isn't with the group grabs Ichigo and heads for the city."

"I can fight." Ichigo struggled to sit up. "You can't take him on your own."

"Really?" Karin quirked an eyebrow. "What are you going to do, trip him while curled up in the fetal position?"

Ichigo scowled, but didn't argue.

"Karin, how much time do we have?"

"Maybe five minutes."

"And sensing is your specialty?"

"I've been running for an hour straight to get here!"

"Alright, change of plans." Naruto created a single clone that immediately dispelled to signal all of the others. Sitting down and crossing his feet, he closed his eyes and prepared for the onslaught of experience. "I need everyone to be quiet."

"This doesn't seem as effective as the first plan."

"I'm going to absorb all the improvements my clones have made. Being able to pull off my bigger techniques is the only chance we have. I also need paper and ink."

"You going to write him an angry let-" Karin's head whipped around as all color left her face. "He just exploded forward so fast I almost lost track of him!"

Naruto's gut twisted into a knot as he felt the presence appear and race straight for them. Damn it, his brain would have to work out all the information in the middle of the fight. Even with the knowledge, it would have been better for his actual body to have a chance to work it out.

"Ichigo, stay inside and watch from the windows." Naruto climbed to his feet. "If, and only if, you see an opening where you can finish him

off do you jump in. You go as big as you can. Do not hesitate, even if I'm in the middle of it."

"No way. I'm not going to sacrifice anyone."

Naruto's lips tightened as he fought back the nervousness tickling his chest.

"You worry about finishing off Tesra. I'll be fine."

He stepped outside, ignoring Ichigo's protests. There wouldn't be any opening. Naruto knew he needed to guide the fight away from everyone. The command was only to make Ichigo stay put. A hundred visions flashed through his head, causing him to slightly stumble.

How the hell didn't he notice the Bunshin trick as a kid?

Facing the direction he knew Tesra was coming from, Naruto exhaled slowly, allowing his thoughts to settle. Winning required three very important things, any variant of the Shunshin, his Odama Rasengan, and not giving the Arrancar a chance to transform. It wasn't just the physical increase, the pig's power skyrocketed to the point his regular Rasengan only made him stumble. If he became the were-warthog, any chance of defeating him flew out the window.

"I wonder what it would be like to actually fight without being the underdog for once."

The air trembled as Tesra appeared in the sky above the farm. Naruto's lips curled up into a feral grin.

"Hey pork roast, you don't look very happy." He needed to get the bastard ground level. "I can't imagine spending all night trying to find your sword was fun."

Come on, charge so I can Shunshin behind and smash a Rasengan upside your head.

"You are an extremely aggravating individual." Tesra unsheathed his Zanpakuto. "I have never met someone with such a chaotic fighting method, and I hope I never will again."

Tesra dove down, his blade prepped by his ear for a powerful horizontal slash.

Yes!

The Arrancar stuck his free hand out, red energy forming on the tips.

"Oh sh-"

The raging blast surged down, bathing everything in an identically colored glow. It struck in a terrifying explosion as the air shook and thrashed, kicking dust and smoke throughout the entire field.

Naruto held his Rasengan out in front of him. The orb unfazed by the destruction.

The beam hadn't struck him? Had Tesra aimed for the house instead? Did he dare look back when the Arrancar could lunge out of the fog at any moment? Something was definitely casting a shadow from within the shroud. Was that… a wall?

Revealed by a gentle clearing breeze, a proud wall of sand stretched out wider than the house and completely undamaged from the deadly blast.

"That was an impressive cero." Naruto's mouth opened in excitement and Gaara landed on top of the wall. His posture remained as rigid as ever, a sharp contrast to the white coat billowing out behind him. "Are you an Espada?"

Tesra's uncovered eye narrowed as he stood in the air.

"I am the sole Fraccion of Nnoitra-sama, the fifth Espada."

"I see." The sand floated away from the wall and formed into long tendrils. "Then you are merely a nuisance to be dealt with quickly."

Author's Notes:

I want to apologize for the delay. I had major difficulties with writing flow and then got hit by a very weird and disorienting head-cold. I had so many typos Lee sounded like he'd gained a Scottish accent (me instead of my), and my brother couldn't go three sentences without wondering what word I meant to put in. I'm still having problems putting sentences together and doing basic math… although that could be the double doses of NyQuil.

Anyway, if I can start typing at more than ten words a minute, I would like to try and get a second chapter up Saturday or Sunday. I will at least get the synopsis of Naruto Asunder out as requested. It will be added into the Glimpse chapter at the end of Asunder.

As always, any thoughts you have are appreciated. I hope I've introduced the Bleach elements in smoothly and kept the information manageable for the non-Bleach readers. If there are things that are still confusing, please send a message my way and I'll either give a better explanation in the story or clear it up with you directly. The only exception would be if I'm intentionally leaving it mysterious until later on.

Regards,

Warj

Clouding

Disclaimer: I do own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 5:

"A nuisance?" Tesra let his sword drop down to the side as his lone eye scanned Gaara's coat. "You wear a captain's haori, yet we have no information about you. Tell me Shinigami, did they hide you or are you merely playing at being a captain?"

A stream of sand shot up out of the ground, wrapping around the Arrancar's neck and smashing him headfirst into the ground. The sand wall lowered Gaara as it pooled out across the field.

"Did that feel like someone who is merely playing?" Gaara glanced over his shoulder. "It is good to see you unharmed, Naruto Uzumaki."

Naruto's mouth trembled as it formed into a smile. His fellow Jinchuriki looked older than he remembered, more like an adult, but still stood an inch or so shorter. His red hair was a little shaggier, and the teal eyes a little bright-

"Gaar- watch out!"

His barrier swept up behind him, blocking Tesra's slash. The Arrancar sprang back as the sand reached out to ensnare him. Gaara slowly turned away from Naruto and watched as Tesra landed roughly with his blade in front of him. More sediment spiraled up around the Fraccion's body, and with a wave of the captain's arm, compressed into a solid stalagmite.

"I still find it odd how poorly many on this side handle indirect attacks."

"Man, dying hasn't made you lose your edge." Naruto walked up beside him. "You're even using less sand."

"Jiraiya-san taught me the importance of efficiency and precision. I never had time to fully train their applications on that side." He offered his hand. "It is good to see you again, my friend."

"Same here."

"Naruto!" Nel came running across the field waving her hands in the air. "I was so scared Tesra was going to gut you. Where'd all this sand come from? Who's that guy?"

Gaara gave Naruto a questioning look.

"Long story."

Nel neared them, casting a wary eye on Gaara's haori. Suddenly, a powerful reiatsu exploded behind her blowing the sand pillar apart. Tesra charged out of the debris, his powerful hooves puncturing the ground in quaking steps. He raised a powerful arm high up over his gleaming tusks and swung down.

"Dynamic Entry!"

Lee sailed through the air and slammed his foot into the side of the were-warthog's face. Its head rocked back as Lee sprung off and scooped up the little girl. Tesra's shadow loomed over him, and he only had time to see a massive hand back fist him into the fire at the front of the shack. Sliding face first through ember and flames then twisting, he shielded Nel with his body and crashed through the shack's wall.

"Lee!" Naruto sprinted over to the hole and peered inside. "Lee, are you okay?"

The taijutsu user lay flat on his back with his head toward the opening and an arm wrapped protectively over Nel. Even flattened out, he gave a prone variation of his nice guy pose. His face was slightly thinner than in the past with sharper more defined features. His eyes had narrowed, so while large, they weren't the same freakishly round orbs from before. The fire had singed his eyebrows to a human level and teased his hair into something slightly more wild than the immaculate bowl cut. He still looked like Lee just more masculine.

Karin rushed over, checking Nel over as she helped her to her feet.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm just a little dizzy." Nel teetered back and forth. "I think I'm gonna barf."

"Do it on Ichigo then."

"Kay."

Ichigo shouted a protest, but Nel stumbled over and crashed into him. His weak abs gave out and he fell back to the floor. Karin pulled Lee up and froze, a light blush forming over her cheeks.

"Miss." Lee took her hand in his. "I apologize for the destruction of your home. I will not leave until I have knocked down as many trees as you need to rebuild it better than before."

The blush deepened.

Naruto shook his head with a sigh. He whipped around as the ground shook and saw Tesra pulling his fist out of the earth as Gaara landed behind him. Naruto frowned as the Arrancar swatted away the sand relentlessly grabbing at him and smashed another barrier. He charged through a veil of sand and crushed Gaara's head, before the body faded away.

"This is my first time battling an Arrancar." Gaara appeared next to Naruto in a whirl of his element. "I was hoping to gain some experience before I encountered a powerful one."

Tesra broke free from another dozen tendrils.

"Why didn't you try to help Lee?"

"I told him I would let him die if he could not handle himself." Gaara glanced out of the corner of his eye. "He and the child are fine, yes?"

"The way Karin was looking at him I'm not sure." Naruto stretched out his hand in preparation of a Rasengan. "Alright, let's take this guy down."

"There is no need for you to participate."

"But-"

"If you were capable of defeating him, you would have done so already." Gaara strode forward, ignoring the blonde's scowl. "You need time to adapt to your soul."

"Your sand can't crush him though!"

"Yes, but again, Naruto." Gaara brought his arm out to the side. "I merely took the time to gain some experience, since the opportunity was available."

He swiped his arm forward and twenty large blades of sand burst out of the pool resting on the ground. Surrounding Tesra like a cage, they rushed inward. The Arrancar batted away the first wave only for a new layer to replace it. In little more than an instant, the first razor edge struck, then the next, the rest followed in a rapid series until all motion stopped.

"Suna Kiritori Gokusha."

Bits of Tesra slowly began to fall until the diced entirety of his body crumbled under gravity's weight. The sand surged up and consumed the remains, grinding it into oblivion. Gaara pulled the blade out an inch from the gourd tied to the small of his back, and the coarse sediment steadily returned. When the last grain entered the odd scabbard, he fully sheathed his Zanpakuto and faced Naruto.

"Remind me not to piss you off - ever."

"For him to give you so much difficulty, you must have materialized a very short time ago. I am sure you will be stronger than me soon enough."

The Millennium Earl never stopped moving. If he stood, he would hop around or rock back and forth. If he sat, his arms would swing around in a grand performance as he spoke. Every physical action alluded to an underlying agitation, so deep under the skin the being could only suffer without relief. Yet, his charming words carried the wisdom of something cold and ancient. And whatever aura lurked under the cheerful façade was so densely malevolent it made the Espada, beings born of death, uncomfortable.

The more the creature appeared. The more curious Aizen became.

What kind of power was it? How deep did it go? How did it compare to the spiritual energy of Arrancar and Shinigami alike? The creature itself became a greater curiosity as well. What was the breadth of its existence? How did no one know of it? More importantly, how did this gray man know so much?

"Oh, I see the gears turning in that grand mind of yours." The Earl sipped at his tea. "You have many questions about this other world I am sure."

"I am more curious about how you know of a world no one else does, and how you plan to reach it."

The Earl took another sip, and a low rumble seeped through his teeth.

"When the man I spoke of arrived, he had already passed on and became a being like yourself - a soul. The only reason he did not immediately cross into the afterlife was because of his vast spiritual power, which allowed him to become the first physical spirit… the first Shinigami."

"And he attempted to thwart your flood."

"Yes. My flood was both symbolic, as well as, literal. It should have removed any trace of humanity leaving only my family of Noah." The slightest twitch revealed the tightening of the Earl's hand. "I defeated him, but not before he ensured humanity's survival. His interference allowed future generations to be born without the Noah gene being their dominate trait. No new Noah would ever exist. Our blood only remained strong enough for my family to be reborn in another life. Instead of my children having Noah children, they only birthed sinful humans."

"These Noah. Are they like you?"

"No, they lacked this charming shape of mine." The Earl motioned waved his free hand dismissively. "Noah were chosen humans gifted with my power."

"So humans merely gave birth to humans without your power?"

"Do not be so dismissive of their pain!" The Earl paused and coughed lightly into his fist. "My dear, little pup, a Noah giving birth to a human is no different than a human giving birth to a snake. The few who did not outright consider their newborns as abominations suffered the most. They tried to show love but humans instinctively fear Noah."

The Earl gazed up through the ceiling, the ornate slats allowing the moon to cast a melancholic glow. His yellow eyes glazed over as if

the past played out before them.

"The hurt they felt being rejected by squalling infants unable to even see the kindness in their faces."

Aizen silently clasped his hands, peering over his fingers as his elbows rested on the table. So the creature did possess emotions buried deep under the carefree speeches. How interesting that something radiating such darkness held compassion… for others no less.

"They let their children go then?"

"They cared for their children from afar." The Earl set his cup down and held his cheeks as a fake blush crept up. "Oh there I go telling stories again. I'm afraid age has worsened my rambling."

The Earl giggled and shook himself back and forth in embarrassment.

"Then let us get back on topic."

"Yes, the man from another world, the great sage of that world. I am still unsure whether he created the path or stumbled upon it. Regardless, he put a gate in place to prevent anyone from this side going over there."

"Then how do we get over there?"

"You must understand our battle lasted decades. He founded and trained the first Shinigami within Soul Society. They battled my Noah, and neither side paid attention to these soul eating creatures called Hollows that were starting to appear. He only sealed the path after the final confrontation that led to both our demise."

"A hollow slipped through to that side."

"A sentient, very intelligent Hollow that posed as a God of Death for humans to summon at the cost of their souls." The Earl walked his

fingers across the table to a plate of meat. "But it did not slip through. The sage sent it through to somehow act as a cork to block the path. Your blonde guest killed this hollow seven years ago."

"Which unlocked the gate."

"And it has slowly been opening ever since then."

Aizen leaned back in his chair as the Earl dug into the plate. This being was so random there was no way he could discern truth from fiction. Everything it said could be derived solely from mad delusions. However, so much of Soul Society's history remained entrenched in oral stories of a lawless era. Not until Genryusai-dono established the Gotei 13 and Seireitei did formal records take root. The truth of this information did not matter. Merely that the creature knew enough to choose it as a setting carried importance.

"For you to know about the one who rescued Ichigo, you must have spent time in that world."

"I have my ways. The path needs to be widened for any real force to invade. Only a few weaker hollows are stumbling through right now." Dabbing his toothy mouth with a handkerchief, the Earl pushed the empty plate away. "We have more pressing matters to attend to at the moment. Come; let us go speak with this child who can reject fate."

Ichigo leaned against the doorframe of the shack to keep himself upright. The Karin woman may have been unsympathetic in her treatment and lacked a caring bedside manner, but the results worked. He could at least make it to Seireitei on his own, even if it would take hours more than usual in his current state.

He refused to be carried anymore though.

Naruto chatted excitedly with the Lee guy as Gaara discreetly teased Nel by using his sand to tap her shoulder then disappear into the dirt.

Everyone else probably didn't see it from where they were. They thought he was focused entirely on the two most animated guys. They were an odd group. Then again, Naruto seemed like the kind of guy who'd be a magnet for odd.

He still hadn't figured him out.

On one hand, Naruto stuck with him, a complete stranger, and fought a losing battle to get them all out of Hueco Mundo. Then, he turned around and left Orihime behind. Sure, Naruto's reasoning made sense and may have even been the right call.

I would have found a way to save all of them though.

He knew his friends would manage until he found a way to get back again. The other Shinigami may be upset since he went once against their orders, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to dive right back in as soon as his body would let him. Orihime, Rukia, Chad, Uryu, and Renji, he wouldn't let them fight alone, and he definitely wasn't going to let them go up against the stronger Espada. He would find a way to beat the upper half next time. He had to.

"I should go with you guys to the city." Karin walked out of the shack and stood next to him. When the Lee guy looked her way she blushed and waved her hand in front of her face. "T- to watch over Ichigo's health of course."

"I'm fine, Karin-san."

Karin elbowed him in the gut hard enough he doubled over.

"Oh Ichigo, you're still so fragile. Just look at yourself." She caught him and lowered her head down by his ear. "Listen you little punk, I am not going to let that black haired god walk out of my life without being able to chat him up first. Now, you play along and be a good patient, understood?"

Ichigo nodded nervously and she helped him up with a smile.

"Nel." Naruto crouched down to her eye level. "You should probably stay here with Jugo. It should be safer than trying to explain to every Shinigami we see that you are our friend."

"Nope, I'm coming." Nel folded her arms and twisted her nose up in the air. "It's more fun with you guys."

"You-"

"If I beat you in a fight, I get to go deal?"

"Nel, wha-"

Nel swung her foot up and caught him square in the groin. The blonde paled and fell over to his side in the fetal position. Nel pumped her arms up in the air and spun around.

"I am the champion!"

"I- 'm gonna kill," Naruto mumbled out before a dry heave filled his throat.

"Naruto-kun, do not die." Lee clenched his fist. "Stand my friend!"

"The man who killed Madara, felled by a child." Gaara shook his head. "It is a sad day."

Ichigo felt himself smile as Nel marched around her fallen opponent cheering. They were kind of a scary group. So friendly, even goofy, but so powerful. He'd felt how quickly Gaara defeated Tesra when he finally chose to do so. And the captain had made it clear Naruto was stronger still. If only the lost ninja had that ability in the desert.

No, this was his fight. He allowed Chad and the others to join him in his rescue, even though it was against his better judgment. They weren't strong enough. He knew they wanted to be, and he couldn't be more grateful for their loyalty and friendship. However, their suffering was on him. Them being trapped in enemy territory was on him.

He needed to get back to Hueco Mundo. He needed to make it right, and he would do it on his own.

He refused to be carried anymore.

Hinata felt her hands tremble as she caught sight of Mayuri's gleeful smile. Despite spending almost all of her time in bed without a mirror, she knew what he was so excited about. She could feel it the more her power awoke inside her body; the sensation of the tissue under her skin crawling. The predatory grace in every movement, Danzo's experiments carried over.

"You hid something from me, girl." Mayuri waggled a finger. "How absent minded of you."

"I had hoped it did not carry over."

"Preposterous!" The mad scientist tossed a file over on a desk. "While the genetic work had been remedial in comparison to my own knowledge, and ultimately unstable, it was so very intriguing to scrutinize."

Hinata felt worry pool in her gut. Unstable? Danzo hadn't even administered something proven?

"Kurotsuchi-san, what do you mean unstable?"

"Your body was under a continual metamorphosis." He grasped at his chin. "It is odd for it to carry over to your soul, but I have documented cases of scars, missing limbs, and other characteristics being carried over from the human body. I hypothesized it may have to do with how engrained it was into your psyche. How much you felt it was a part of you."

Hinata squeezed her fingers into a fist. She never felt like that. Even with Naruto's unflinching acceptance and the advantage it gave her in a fight, she still wanted it to go away.

"Am I still changing?"

"Unfortunately, I was told to put a stop to it. Such a waste of good data."

"The man who developed this eventually wasn't even human. He was a snake living in a human shape. I still feel like something is crawling under my skin." Her chest tightened. "Is my-"

She couldn't say it. The idea she would wake up one night in a slithering pile - it made her nauseous.

"You have extremely flexible tissue and superior regenerative qualities, up to and including rebuilding new limbs. Watching your arm grow back was a treat." He ignored her incredulous gasp. "The feeling you have is likely your reiryoku preparing to heal you since you are obviously agitated and engaged in a fight or flight response. It should pass if you calm down."

Calm down? Yes, she needed to. Worrying wasn't going to help right now. Hinata exhaled slowly and forced her heartbeat to slow. She was okay. She wasn't going to become like Orochimaru. Keep repeating it and breathing evenly.

"My eyes are they fixed?"

"I have limited your sphere to a manageable diameter. There is one issue you should be aware of however."

The crawling feeling surged back to life.

"What is it?" She struggled to keep the desperation hidden from her voice.

"Your energy is potent. I could even say it carries a dark streak. You will gain power rapidly as a result. This does put the limitation at risk of being broken." He leaned his face in closer so that his sterile

scented breath brushed her nose. "I don't need to tell you how dangerous that would be in the middle of a war."

Chaotic chakra saturated wind snapped wickedly at his face as huge chunks of stone were ripped from the tower's floor. Like two demonic roars shaking against each other, the energies shrieked and made the night air tremble under the frightening clash. The void grew slowly at first, sucking in the hand first.

Minato Namikaze tried to call out over the din. If his son heard him, he never knew. The orb of nothing surged outward, enveloping Naruto and Madara alike. He stared in horror for only an instant, then pulled himself to safety with his prized technique as a force from above sent Madara's spire crumbling down.

Minato awoke with a sharp gasp and shot out of his chair. Aqua eyes rapidly scanned the small living room and kitchen, his muscles trembling under his vest like a feline ready to strike.

No, calm down, you're home, it was only bad memories.

Rubbing the grogginess from his face, he stretched his arms over his head and yawned. Was it noon yet? He'd gotten back from his mission just before dawn, and didn't want to wake Kushina by climbing into bed.

"You'd think I would have woken up and been able to see the twins off to the academy."

They were getting too stealthy for their own good if he slept through them leaving. From what his old neighbors said, Naruto never had that problem. He frowned and moved over the kitchen table and picked up the small note resting on it.

Welcome home

A small smile crept up as his thumb traced the three signatures decorating the bottom. It'd been a long week trying to track down that band of missing-nin. Being out in the field more than a few days was a rare occurrence, and always made Kushina and the twins anxious. All ninja families felt it and accepted that feeling. He just didn't get as many lengthy missions anymore. It spiked the normal uneasy feelings.

His attention flicked over to the bookshelf by the entrance, focusing on the orange photo album tucked into the top shelf. Why hadn't he made the same commitments earlier? Why did he continue making the same mistakes when it came to Naruto?

He understood Naruto was the only one with the power to deal with Madara. He knew Naruto would only accept those he trusted as part of a team, and that list didn't include his parents. He respected that decision, but damn it, if he'd only changed his mind sooner.

Minato tugged his shoes on and went outside. Leaping off the railing, he sailed out over the lower houses further down the hill as the air rushed through his hair. Why?

Kushina had begged him in secret before they left. She begged for him to convince Naruto to let them come. They were powerful ninja and could be the younger generations shield. She desperately wanted to partner with Hinata, to ensure the girl would make it through and Naruto wouldn't lose her. Kushina was determined to make sure they both made it home even if she had to sacrifice herself.

He'd told her no. They never left Naruto with any choices, and they had no right to interfere with his decision on who came with him. Besides, they were beneath Madara's notice strength-wise. Kakashi only made sense because of his experience training Naruto. He could anticipate where he needed to be to give Naruto the advantage. They couldn't, and the same went for the other two. Having an untested team was almost worst than being outnumbered.

The odds of friendly fire multiplied drastically, even if everyone involved was highly skilled.

She relented only because he conceded to secretly place a seal on each of them when he warped everyone as a group. The plan was to stay out of the way and then warp in if they defeated their opponents and needed to get out fast. It should have worked well. They were strong. They would win.

Hinata's seal just dissipated like it had been burned off. Lee's heart stopped as he lifted up his broken body. And Naruto… all he could do is watch Naruto be eaten by his own technique.

Landing on a small balcony, Minato pushed aside some thin drapes and stepped into another small living room. A worn flak jacket was framed on the far wall, and provided the only thing noteworthy in the bland apartment.

"I didn't know you got back already, Sensei."

Kakashi Hatake entered from an adjoining room, his bare hands pushing the wheels of his chair. He still kept the Konoha headband over the empty socket that used to house his Sharingan, and his face still hid behind the ever present mask. His arms were still sinewy with toned muscle, but the legs had thinned considerably.

"It was late last night. I hope I didn't wake you."

"Mah, mah, I was just doing some light reading." The copy-nin gave a slight smile. "Although, I still haven't really found anything that matches Jiraiya-san's works."

"And how are the treatments with Ino-san going? Have you made any further progress?"

Kakashi wheeled to the center of the room and motioned for his teacher to sit in the chair across from him. Minato accepted with a grateful nod.

"She fears we've gone as far as her current medical expertise allows us to, and it is leagues beyond many of the other village's medic-nin. Frankly, it was a miracle to even get my arms and chest working again." Kakashi's eye turned up in its signature style. "I can still use chakra and assist our Rokudaime in training your children and their teammates. I am content with that."

Minato nodded slowly. When he had gotten his student back to the refugee camp, they found his spine crushed and multiple sections completely severed. It had taken years of study and painful experimentation for Ino Yamanaka to gain the ability to even take it this far.

"I don't know how you do it, Kakashi."

"You taught me to keep moving forward."

Minato let his eyes drift to the floor. Kakashi had looked so completely broken he thought his genius student was dead. It had only been the sudden movement of his shoulders and an instinctive lunge that allowed him get them both out before Naruto's technique devoured them both. His student had survived, outliving another team and more friends.

"I never thought you wouldn't blame me. I mean, I blame myself for many things."

"I think guilt always comes to the front when someone we cherish dies."

"I wake up remembering that night often, and it gets me second guessing every decision I ever made in regards to him."

"You put the village first."

"Did I though?" Minato rested his forehead on his hands. "Sandaime literally begged to take my place in sealing the Kyubi. I was so sure only I knew enough about the seal to make changes if something

went wrong or if Madara attacked directly. I stubbornly believed I couldn't ask someone else to sacrifice their life."

Minato closed his eyes and tilted his head to the side with a grimace.

"I would have kept Danzo in line. I would have convinced the Fire Daimyo to let Kushina stay. Naruto would never have grown up alone, and Kushina wouldn't hate herself. Naruto would have had all the training he ever needed to stop Madara early." Minato jaw tightened until in almost cramped. "He would have had my Hiraishin, Kakashi."

"And I could have been there for him from the start." Kakashi focused his lone eye directly on his teacher's face. "Saying that being alone to struggle made him the exceptional ninja, the exceptional man, he became would only be a way to ease our own conscience. The only thing we know is that he became the best despite us. That is the only comfort we get. That is the only comfort we deserve."

Orihime Inoue stood beside Aizen's throne in his expansive assembly hall. The same room she was first brought to when they captured her. She still wasn't sure how she felt being around him. His power could saturate the air with a smirk. It often smothered her to the point she worried she would pass out. However, he wouldn't hurt her, and none of his Arrancar, gathered at the base of the steps, would either. The few that did were quickly… dealt with.

She wasn't sure what Nnoitra would do if he ever managed to isolate her. Part of her believed he wouldn't risk Aizen's wrath and harm her. The other part of her was just glad Ulquiorra showed up in time she never found out. It was draining being around people you weren't sure would harm you, or if the person holding your leash would let you go and give his wolves free reign.

Her heart hurt though. It hurt enough to cover up the fear of her murky future. Renji-san was dead so the others could escape. All of

them were terribly hurt because they wanted to save her. Kurosaki-kun was hurt trying to save her, and she had no idea if he was still alive or not. Naruto-san seemed smart and strong. She prayed he got them all to safety.

"Such a cute young lady to wield such a frightful power."

Orihime felt a deep cold seep into her bones as a rotund demon floated down from the shadowed ceiling using an umbrella. Her mouth ran dry as every cell in her body recoiled from the invisible malignant presence he cast around him. Aizen let out some of his own power in an almost gentle way, like it was wrapping around her as a shield.

It unnerved her she found the gesture slightly comforting.

"Who the frick are you?"

Nnoitra rubbed at his recently healed jaw and swung his crescent scythe out in front of him. The fifth Espada had been extremely violent since their return, threatening his comrades and leaving to kill weaker Arrancar and hollows. It didn't help Gin often snuck jabs at his pride, mocking him for being unable to finish off Kurosaki-kun and the others.

"Good evening." The Earl gave a bow to the Espada. "I see you have recovered from your thrashing."

"Why you fat little f-"

"Nnoitra." Aizen's rested the side of his head on his fist. "Please do not be rude to our guest. The Millennium Earl is always welcome in my home."

"Oh, let the boy have his fun, my future ascendant." The Earl's manic eyes glowed through his glasses. "I promise not to be too rough on the child."

"Very well. Perhaps, it is time you prove you possess some level of spiritual power."

"What I use is far different from that." He kicked his leg up behind him and balanced on his toes. "Shall we begin?"

Nnoitra scowled and swung this massive weapon down. The Earl spun away effortlessly then bounced to his other foot. The Espada lunged forward with a stab and the rotund man flicked the flat of the blade with tips of his gloved fingers, sending Nnoitra spiraling across the floor.

Orihime watched as fear pummeled her insides. The Earl never used any form of high speed movement, or let off any power, but he was dominating the hollow man who crushed Kurosaki-kun and Naruto-san. The gray man chuckled and teased like it was a friendly game of tag, even though nothing but pure murder radiated off of Nnoitra's every expression and action.

Her gray eyes turned to Aizen. On the surface, he appeared normal. For some reason though, she could almost see how unusually interested he was. Nothing ever escaped his notice, but nothing ever truly captured his attention either. This strangely shaped person, this Earl, had Aizen's full interest. That scared her almost as much as the dark person himself.

"You have shown us you can dance well, Earl, my friend." Aizen stood and the full weight of his reiatsu came crashing down upon everyone in the room. Nnoitra and Orihime fully fell to their knees, and even the stronger Espada and Aizen's personal guards had sweat forming on their brows. "But you have not shown me the power necessary to back your promises."

Orihime struggled to look up and keep conscious even as it felt like the air itself was squeezing the life out of her. She caught sight of the Earl as her vision tunneled, and for a moment, his eyes caught her watering ones and pure terror made time stop for her. Those eyes

were laughing. The Earl simply stood there unfazed, completely amused at Aizen's display.

The inhuman creature chuckled and gave a sweeping bow.

"Is that all you wished to see? I do apologize then for wasting your time. You will forgive me for amusing myself of course."

Aizen reigned his reiatsu back in as the Earl gave a wink. Spinning on his heel, the Shinigami knelt down in front of her and offered his hand like a charming prince.

"I apologize, my dear Orihime." He took her shaking hand in his own and helped her up. "I am afraid I can not select who feels my power."

The Espada collectively balked as he moved her over to his throne and guided her into the seat. Turning back to the audience, he stood regally at her side and peered down as Nnoitra struggled to reclaim his footing.

"Can you go on, Nnoitra?"

"Yes, Aizen-sama." The Arrancar's reiatsu swept out over the floor. "I'm going to cleave you in ha-"

The Earl stepped in as an orb of dark purple, encased within a pink glow, crackled to life within his palm and gently pressed it into the Espada's chest. In a blinding flash, the room quaked as the glow of a powerful blast slowly died down. The Earl faced the throne. Nnoitra lay sprawled atop the remains of a pillar, a smoking barely-living husk.

"The power I wield is called dark matter. It is yours to use as you deem fit, so long as it furthers our goals."

Aizen's eyes narrowed even as the honey-brown orbs shimmered in excitement.

"And what are your goals, Millennium Earl?"

"I wish to see you loom over this world as God!" The Earl thrust his pointer finger into the air. "I wish for you to wipe the sinful blight that is humanity from existence. I wish to see you craft a new world and a new heaven! I want what was promised to me as the First Disciple. I want the Noah to inherit your Earth and be blessed as your children!"

Naruto groaned silently as Nel requested another break. He knew she didn't need it and only asked because Ichigo was too damn stubborn to ask for one himself. The kid hid his fatigue well at first. He'd wipe sweat away when he thought no one was looking, and his shoulders only sagged after he fell a step back.

Ichigo was tough and Naruto respected him for it. However, he didn't dare take his eye off the carrot top. The Substitute had a look in his eye he'd seen in the mirror plenty of times, that pure stubborn glint to do something well-meaning and stupid. Considering Orihime and the rest of the rescue team were still in that desert, it didn't take much to figure out what Ichigo intended to do.

He'd keep an eye on him for the time being and then ask around Seireitei.

"I wish I could say things were peaceful in this life, and that our problems only extended to protecting souls from hollows." Gaara picked Nel up under his arm, ignoring her babbled protests.

"Let me guess, another jackass who wants the power to do something selfish." Naruto angrily scratched the back of his head. "Just tell me it doesn't involve any Sharingan."

"His name is Sosuke Aizen. He was the Fifth Division's Captain until he betrayed us alongside two other captains."

"Us?"

"I took over as Captain of the Ninth Division to replace the traitor Kaname Tosen. Us refers to the Gotei 13."

"Oh." Naruto shook off the discomfort Gaara's admission triggered. "So what's this guy's deal?"

"He wants to overthrow the Spirit King, the ruler of Soul Society." Nel gave up and hung limply. "He's used a device called the Hogyoku to create an army of Arrancar. I'm sure you are aware of how dangerous they can be."

"So why don't these Gotei guys just invade?"

"Aizen is in a similar position to Danzo when he took over Oto, in both terms of strategy and inside knowledge. He likely has countermeasures in place to trap us there." Gaara glanced back at Ichigo. "Doing so would leave Karakura Town defenseless when Aizen launches the first strike in his war."

"And that place is?"

"My home town." Ichigo walked up beside them. "He's going to sacrifice everyone to the Hogyoku to make the key needed to get to the Spirit King's city."

"That is truly despicable." Lee slapped Ichigo's shoulder. "Do not worry my new friend. We shall defend your home with our burning fists."

Karin quirked an eyebrow with an amused smile.

"Like how you defended my home?" Lee slumped and Karin quickly reached out for his arm. "Hey, I'm sorry I didn't-"

"You are completely right, Karin-san!" Lee flipped onto his hands. "I must develop this body through the same intensive training I did in my past. I shall travel the remainder of our journey upon my fingers alone!"

"I- Lee."

"Forget it, Karin." Naruto folded his hands behind his head. "It's worked for him up until now."

"Come Ichigo-kun, join me in the powerful training masterfully crafted by Gai-sensei."

Ichigo jabbed a thumb toward Lee.

"Is he serious?"

"Lee was one of the best. Although, don't believe what he says about skintight green jumpsuits and legwarmers."

Karin stifled a perverted giggle.

"That looks like fun." Nel wiggled free from Gaara and hopped over. She paused as a horrified expression stretched across her face. "I have no pants!"

With a defeated sigh she bent over at the waist and trudged back up to Gaara.

"I will tell you more later." He picked Nel up again. "Having you around will be a large boost to our strength."

"I've got a ways to go before I'm in fighting shape again."

Naruto ignored the voice in the back of his head questioning whether he actually wanted to get involved in another fight. He needed to fight and deal with that gray bastard he met in the void. It didn't matter how he felt about it. Fighting again didn't mean it would turn out like the battle with Madara.

It didn't.

They exited the forest trail and gigantic white walls rose up from the ground to meet them. Gaara led them over to a gate larger than most buildings. Their strange group entered as those seeing it for the first time let their jaws drop in awe. The walls had to be two, no,

three times taller than Konoha's, and they stretched out so wide he couldn't see the ends of them.

"If you are going to gawk, you should probably place your attention on something more worthy, Naruto." Gaara set Nel down and she quickly pointed straight ahead.

"Hey, who's the babe?"

Naruto looked down and all the air caught in his lungs.

"Na- Naruto-kun?"

He squeezed his eyes shut as they watered, and the warmest smile he ever had formed on his lips.

"Hey, Hinata."

Author's Notes:

I made a small edit to the last chapter. Renji was lieutenant of the sixth division, not the tenth. Thank you to everyone who pointed it out.

Overall, writing this chapter was easier. With all the groundwork laid out, I can really start digging into the meat of the plot and character interactions. Whether you feel that is my strong suit is up to you, but it at least comes to me more naturally when writing.

I am a little worried about showing the changes in these characters (Minato comes to mind in this chapter) without being out of character. All of them have been through a lot, and are in very different roles than in the past. I want to show that progression in a believable way. It is exciting, and so far I think successful, but still gives me pause.

I think that is everything. If the sky doesn't fall like the past two weeks, the schedule should be back to normal.

See you this weekend

Outline

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 6:

He couldn't breathe or move or even speak more than his simple greeting. All he could do was smile and stare. Why? Was it how beautiful she was? No. Sure, she was taller and maybe a little more slender. The last traces of her teenage years had melted away, leaving the face and figure of a stunning young woman. He even found the pale skin and dark vertical slits hidden behind the normal lavender of her irises only added to everything.

She was always beautiful though. Never once since they become closer did he think otherwise. Not when she lay broken in the hospital bed, or he first saw the consequences of Danzo's actions. Perhaps a selfish part of him even felt more drawn to her because of the latter.

It doesn't matter what we are or become. We're the same.

No, it was because she was standing in front of him, smiling with that wonderful kindness only she could express. Even being assured by Kyo she crossed over, even after meeting Gaara and Lee, the fear he would never see her again lingered. His last feeling of her would be the heart-breaking sensation of her dying. His last memory of her would be that moment in Sage Mode, literally seeing her life flicker painfully and disappear into black.

He hadn't even realized how afraid he was until now. No, that wasn't right. He hadn't allowed himself to think about it. Dealing with

survival, pushing forward, it gave him the excuse to not dwell on what happened… about what might not happen.

Nel looked back and forth between the two for a moment before her face lit up in realization.

"Don't just stand there like a fish." Nel pushed him toward Hinata. "Give her a kiss."

"Wh- hang on, Nel. Quit pushing."

Hinata hid a small chuckle behind her hand as Nel gave a final shove so he stood right in front of the ex-heiress.

"You're as dense as Ichigo." Nel marched back to the chuckling group. "No idea how to speak to a lady."

"I see you've made a new friend already, Naruto-kun." Hinata tilted her head up to stare directly at him. "I'm glad you are safe."

Naruto's smile tightened as he studied her eyes.

"Are you okay? Danzo's experiment, are you-"

"Yes." She nodded reassuringly. "Everything is okay, Naruto-kun."

"Good, that's really good."

Their eyes flickered to the side as a blur zipped past them and stopped in front of Gaara.

"Gaara Taicho, the Commander requests your party's presence immediately." The messenger cast an uncomfortable glance at Nel and Karin. "He has questions for you."

"I assumed he would." Gaara strode past the messenger. "Inform the Commander we are on our way."

The messenger took off along the rooftops.

"He didn't look to happy to see Nel or me." Karin clenched her teeth in a nervous wince. "I guess I should have believed the stories that Seireitei isn't too fond of outsiders."

"They're better than they used to be." Ichigo yawned. "They were a lot worse when my friends and I broke in to save Rukia."

Naruto quirked an eyebrow.

"Should I even ask?"

"Maybe later, we're good now." He rested his hand on top of Nel's skull mask. "We just have to prove to them Nel's on our side."

"Let's go. I do not want to keep the Commander waiting."

Gaara didn't bother to look back or slow his brisk pace. The group shared a look and began following him deeper into the city. Naruto hid the frown tugging at his lips. Cool as he was playing it on the surface, something felt off about Gaara's reaction. The ex-Jinchuriki didn't continually question authority like him, but he didn't obey unquestioningly either. Gaara acted on what he felt was the best action. Maybe he already had planned to go, but Naruto couldn't shake the feeling he would have obeyed even if that wasn't the case.

"Anything we should know about this guy?" Naruto asked.

"Yamamoto Sotaicho is the First Division's Captain and the leader of the entire Gotei 13."

"A Kage basically."

"If all the Kage answered to a single leader, that is who Genryusai Yamamoto would be."

"I'm guessing he has the power to back that kind of title."

"He is unequaled."

"And how open minded is he?" Gaara remained silent. "Great."

The further they went in the more Naruto's frown threatened to surface. He wanted to take in the grand scale of the city, or even better, talk with everyone and try to make it feel a little more normal than it did. Instead, his attention kept getting grabbed by the myriad of looks tossed toward their group - toward Nel.

He'd been on the receiving end of those kinds of looks since his earliest memory. The cold eyes covering up the fear, or the suspicious glares asking a dozen questions. Gaara seemed to sense it too, since he had moved so Nel walked between the two of them. Thankfully, Nel seemed fairly oblivious and more focused on babbling at the others. Perhaps even more so, the stronger Shinigami carried a more curious than antagonistic gaze.

"These people have absolute trust in their captains and the Commander, Naruto." Gaara spoke low so only he could hear. "All we must do is convince him, and these looks will become far more accepting."

The sharp clack of wood striking polished tile echoed from an archway to their right.

"They have absolute trust in us because we are absolute in following the laws of Seireitei." Seated at the far end of an expansive courtyard sat an old man with a snow white beard braided so it hung down the center of his torso behind the gnarled cane propping up his hands. He cracked a cinder eye, leveling it at the group. "Suna no Gaara, why have you grossly betrayed the trust of your subordinates by allowing the enemy entrance into our city?"

"This Arrancar is not our enemy, Yamamoto Sotaicho." Gaara walked out into the courtyard. "She saved Ichigo Kurosaki-"

"Foolish child!" Yamamoto's reiatsu swelled out in a potent wave, a ferocious heat clawing under the surface. "How did you lead a people without knowledge of basic deception? Sosuke Aizen is

responsible for bringing the majority of Arrancar into existence. Did it not occur to you all her actions were under his command?"

"Yamamoto-san." Ichigo stepped protectively in front of a shaking Nel. "Nel-"

"Hold your tongue, Ichigo Kurosaki." Both Yamamoto's eyes fully opened beneath his bushy white eyebrows. "Your actions have only proven you have abysmal judgment."

"I-"

"You dove headfirst into a trap against a direct order."

"They had Orihime! You wanted me to abandon her!"

Yamamoto's power flared, earning a wince from Naruto as his pulse quickened.

"Do not act self-righteous with me, Substitute. You put your selfish and short-sighted need to rescue a single girl over an entire war. Because you could not exercise patience and rationality, Rukia Kuchiki and Yatsutora Sado are in critical condition. Worst of all, the Sixth Division Lieutenant, Renji Abarai, is dead."

"What?" Ichigo's face paled as his voice came out as a hoarse whisper. "Renji's dead?"

Naruto fought back an uncomfortable chill as he looked over his shoulder at the shell-shocked youth. Without Jiraiya's teaching, that could have been him. Hell, the situation was different, but he knew exactly how it felt to lose a friend because you didn't do what was needed. Sakura's tortured face flashed through his mind and the guilt slowly began to bubble in his gut.

"As for you." The old man refocused his attention on Gaara. "You were sent out to retrieve Ichigo and the individual accompanying

him. You have an Arrancar and another who does not where our uniform."

"The woman, Karin, was responsible for keeping Kurosaki alive and well enough to travel."

"And the Arrancar?"

"She can be placed under my guard if you wish until her innocence is proven."

"Innocence? She is derived from a hollow, a creature who thrives upon devouring souls. There is no innocence in such a life, even if the visage of a child may cause our hearts to ache. We cannot risk yet another of Aizen's potential traps." His voice lowered and took on a dangerous edge. "Do your duty as a Shinigami and eradicate the hollow, or I shall."

"Alright, I've had enough of this crap." Naruto brushed off the uneasiness he felt as Yamamoto's attention settled on him. "I spent most of my last life listening to a bunch of old farts tell me I was too dangerous to be trusted just because of what I was. I sure as hell ain't going to watch someone else go through it."

Naruto walked out in front of the entire group and thrust his finger straight at Yamamoto.

"If you can't see Nel for who she is, then maybe you need to shave your eyebrows." He swiped his arm to the side. "And I don't know what these laws of yours are, but as my old Sensei said, those who break the rules are trash, those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash. She may not be your comrade but she is mine, and I won't let you hurt her."

Even though Yamamoto completely eased off the invisible pressure weighing down on them, Naruto felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on edge.

"Yosh, well said, Naruto-kun."

"Lee," Naruto whispered while discreetly signaling Hinata to watch Gaara. "Get everyone back."

"Your teacher, how old was he? Thirty, fifty, a hundred years?" Yamamoto pushed himself up with his cane. "I have lived for thousands. Silly child, do not lecture me with your naïve views."

"You-"

"I have heard enough." Slowly rolling his head around with an audible pop. "The Arrancar will be eliminated, and you youngsters will be taught some discipline and respect."

Jiraiya tugged at his spiky red hair for the third time in as many minutes. He needed to be the calm one who thought everything through. His twin was the one who went crazy over little things. Of course, that's why they decided he should tell their parents. He kept cool and controlled. That's why they should believe him. They had to believe him.

"Jiraiya-chan, stop staring at the door and come in," his mother called out from inside the house.

Sucking in a deep breath, he entered his home and tugged off his sandals before setting them neatly to the side. Kushina stood over the kitchen counter, chopping up random vegetables and piling them into a bowl. She set the knife down and wiped her hands off on her apron before sitting down at the table.

"Now, what has you so worked up?" Kushina stuck out her bottom lip. "Tsunade didn't get into trouble with Umino-chan again did she?"

"No, Okaa-san." He mumbled then shook his head. No, he was going to be a ninja. A ninja did not mumble when reporting information. "Okaa-san, Tsunade and I saw one last night."

He really hoped she wouldn't laugh, or try to hug him like she normally did when he acted super serious. Normally, it made him smile, but this time really was super serious. They had really seen one of the yellow eyed monsters. Well, they were kind of invisible, only giving a really blurry shape, but the eyes glowed enough you could tell it was there - watching them.

"What did you see?"

He blinked in surprise. She wasn't going to tease him? She believed him?

"One of those things the other kids have been seeing."

"Honey." She smiled warmly at him. "Remember to give specifics when giving a report."

"Right." He gave a sharp nod. "Some of the kids at the academy have been talking about how they've seen strange creatures with glowing yellow eyes."

"Are they cats?"

"Tsunade said the same thing, but they aren't. They're kind of invisible. You can only see their shape, like how moving water makes whatever's below it weird."

"Are you sure it isn't an older kid using a genjutsu to prank you?"

Jiraiya frowned and fisted his hands in his pant legs. They hadn't tried to dispel an illusion. Could that have been it? The thing hadn't attacked them while they were training. Didn't some of the others get…?

"No, a few kids have been sick."

"Jiraiya-"

"They got sick after seeing those things!" His mind started racing as the pieces fell in place. "Shingo said his cousin had one attack him, and he's been in bed for days without waking up. A few other kids had the same story."

Jiraiya squirmed in his seat as that distinct vein started to show up on Kushina's forehead.

"Did the one you saw try to attack you?"

"It acted like it wanted to, but it seemed nervous about Tsunade." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry, Okaa-san. I didn't mean to get you upset. I know you've been really sad and-"

She wrapped him up in a bone crunching hug, and the words died from his lips.

"Never apologize for talking to me about anything." She whispered soothingly and stroked the back of his hair. "I would never be upset with you sharing something that makes you worried."

"But-"

"You are a very compassionate young man." She pulled him away and gave him a big toothy grin. "Your mom doesn't deserve a son as good as you."

"Don't say that! You're the best, Okaa-san."

Her smile faltered for only an instant, so quickly he wasn't sure if he imagined it. She placed her hands on his shoulders, giving them a light squeeze.

"Tell you what. Your dad won't be back for a little bit. Let's go sneak some Ichiraku's before dinner." He gasped and beamed up at her as she grabbed his hand. "Just a small bowl okay."

"Okay." He tilted his head to the side. "Okaa-san, your forehead is still angry."

"Don't worry." Her eyes hardened. "I'm just thinking about who I'm going to pummel when I find out who scared my kids."

Orihime's heart thundered against her chest as Aizen guided her to the base of the throne. The last of the Espada exited the hall, escorting Nnoitra's broken body for medical treatment. Broken - the Arrancar who boasted he possessed the strongest Hierro, and who Kurosaki-kun could not even scratch, was broken effortlessly. The thought frightened her. The realization he would be fighting with Aizen terrified her.

"Orihime, meet the Earl of Millennium."

Aizen gestured for her to step closer to the rotund man. She hadn't realized he was fairly tall from where she sat before, easily looming over her at a height similar to Naruto-san's.

"Oh, are you not an adorable creature." He clasped his hand and leaned his head against them. "How cursed you must feel to hold such a heretical power."

She could almost swear he used a heart to punctuate his sentences.

"How d- do you do?"

"And manners as well." The Earl faced Aizen. "I trust my display quells any doubts you may have about my powers or goals."

"Indeed, my friend. However, you have yet to lay out the strategy to accomplish such grandiose goals."

"A servant does not presume to make plans for his king." The Earl held up his hand and summoned another malevolent orb. "This is the most potent form of sorcery in existence. I gift this power to you, the power of dark matter."

Orihime instinctively backed away as the painful feeling of pins and needles jabbed at her skin.

"Do not fret my dear. This is the gentle form I use to infuse dark matter's power."

"Infuse." Aizen peered into the orb's shining center. "You can augment or increase someone's abilities?"

"It depends on the suitability of the receiver." The Earl crushed the orb in his fist. "They must possess a natural tolerance to cursed energy. Otherwise, they shall suffer and die the same as those who receive it as a weapon."

"Yes, the destructive effect was quite impressive."

"You must understand that spiritual beings do present some resistance to it, unlike normal human flesh which crumbles to dust. This provides a significant boon, however."

"Higher classes of hollow and Arrancar would be able more likely to survive the powers acclimation."

"Yes, however, you must understand the process is voluntary. They must accept it fully; such are the requirements of such potent sorcery."

"I fail to see how wanting the power would affect how it reacts with the soul."

"And fail you do." The Earl chuckled and waggled a finger. "For the host to survive, the power is extremely diluted when introduced. It is how deeply the symbiosis, the bond, takes hold that allows for its true potency to become fully realized."

Orihime shuddered. Who would willingly accept something so awful? It didn't seem possible for life to mix with something like that. The Earl had no reason to lie though. What if Aizen did find Arrancar

willing to accept it? Someone like Nnoitra, prideful, humiliated, and hungry for power and revenge. What could someone like that do with something so malignant? How could any of her friends stand up to it?

"An interesting potential, but unnecessary without a clear reason for its use. I see no reason to bolster an army when we will tear reality down upon the Gotei 13's head." The smirk fled Aizen's lips as his face shifted to a more contemplative expression. "Unless, you need a large army to buy time and distract the opposition."

Why did the Earl keep looking at her with that evil glare?

"The gate to the other world will take time, as will the construction of the Altar of Ascension. We must destabilize Seireitei, and I know exactly how to do so."

The smirk returned.

"Please share."

"They have a pest problem hidden within the city's shadows. We should take care of it for them."

"While I am eager to deal with them myself, why would I interfere with any potential hindrances they may incur?"

"Divide and conquer, my future ascendant. We must divide them to conquer them. We destroy their pests so that we alone choose where to direct their attention - across multiple warfronts." The Earl leaned in to the point Orihime could see her reflection in his clenched white teeth. "The first step is truly awakening your powers, my dear. You excel at healing and defending, but you have yet to realize just how destructive your abilities can be."

The instructors at the academy may have disagreed, but Naruto always considered himself a fast learner. Granted, it was limited to

being in battle and probably more a result of guts and hardheadedness, but he was undeniably good at changing tactics in the middle of battle. His training with Ero-sensei only improved it.

His current situation was a shining example of quick learning. In the past three minutes, he had learned what reiatsu truly was. He had learned it could nullify an attack, hurt someone weaker, or act like killing intent. It could be invisible when restrained. It could take on color and shape, like Ichigo's had when his sword changed back to its daito form. And if he guessed right, when the old man fully let loose, it would probably emerge as an element - as flame.

"You will accomplish nothing standing there." Yamamoto strode forward as the wood of his cane shredded away, revealing a simple sheathed katana. "At least face your punishment with dignity."

Ichigo dove straight forward with his sword to the side. In a blur, the substitute swung as his speed peaked. Naruto grimaced as the old man reached out with his long calloused fingers, grasped the daito's hilt between Ichigo's own hands, and twisted. Ichigo gasped as his back smashed painfully against the ground.

"You have no business attacking me in your condition, Ichigo Kurosaki." He flicked his fingers, causing six pillars of light to appear and pin the youth to the ground. "Being injured prevents you from overpowering me with your normal brutish style, and in your impossibly rapid growth, you have failed to refine even the most basic of your techniques."

"I- won't le- let you hurt - Nel." Ichigo struggled against the binding energy.

"So threatens the infant." Yamamoto refocused his attention on the rest of the group. "Who wishes to be reprimanded next?"

Naruto dropped out of his Shunshin behind the aged Shinigami and thrust a Rasengan for the back of his head. Yamamoto disappeared in a showing of pure speed and reappeared behind the blonde.

"Hoh? An interesting movement technique. It is different than our Shunpo."

Naruto caught himself with one hand and flipped over to his feet. Lunging forward, he thrust his Rasengan out as three Bunshin he'd summoned during Ichigo's attempt did the same from above.

"Reduce all creation to ash." Yamamoto drew his katana. "Ryujin Jakka."

Searing hot flames sprouted down the blade like the breath of a dragon, and in an instant, the clones dispersed from the sweltering heat. The burning blade incinerated the spiraling sphere, and Naruto dodged back as fingers of fire reached out for him. He grit his teeth as fiery reiatsu blasted off Yamamoto and encircled the two in a flaming ring.

Naruto held an arm up in front to shield himself from the heat as sweat began to pour down his cheeks. The old bastard's face hadn't even twitched the entire time, like the Rasengan had been a gentle breeze with a few leaves coming at him. This guy outclassed him to a scary level, especially with his limitations. No, he couldn't keep using the lack of Sage Mode or the chakra cloak as an excuse. He defeated Danzo without them… although the Rasenshuriken made up the difference.

With the others' help, they could probably handle him. Lee and Hinata's speed would force him to fight straight on, and Gaara's sand would block the bulk of the fire. He couldn't ask them though. Lee needed to protect the two non-fighters and Gaara - Naruto didn't know who he sided with. That left Hinata, and if Gaara did choose the Shinigami idiots, she needed to keep him out of the battle.

"Don't allow your mind to wander for even a second, unless you wish to become ash."

Summoning three more clones, one transformed into a kunai as the others turned into a tag and ink brush. Naruto caught the kunai in his

teeth, grabbed the other items, and jumped as an arc of fire engulfed where he had been standing. Quickly scribbling down a seal formula, he pumped as much energy as he could into the tag, wrapped it around the kunai, and flung it slightly off the old man's centerline. Yamamoto tilted his head to the side, allowing the kunai to sail by. The Commander sent a stray flame, consuming the reiryoku infused tag.

The seal ignited, crating a blast that knocked Yamamoto ten feet to the side where Naruto waited with another sphere at the ready.

"Rasengan!"

Naruto swung the technique up like an uppercut, but Yamamoto leapt high above it.

"Uzumaki Naruto," two thousand Bunshins chorused as they rained down in a barrage of punches, kicks, and stomps. "Nisen Rendan!"

Yamamoto deflected most of the blows in a flurry of deadly parries. In one great slash, fire climbed through the clones like the logs of a funeral pyre. He landed softly as the burning smoke of the shadow clones above blew away. The aged Shinigami's eyes narrowed as Naruto grinned.

"Boom."

The tag stuck to the bottom of Yamamoto's sandal exploded in a volcanically violent display of stone and flame. Naruto prepped another Rasengan. No way that attack beat him. If he was lucky, it would slow the old guy down enough for his shaky Shunshin to be useful. Regardless, the second the Commander appeared, he would hit him with-

Naruto's thoughts died as a shadow strode through the wall of fire. The flames arched away in reverence as Yamamoto approached. His feet were bare and dirty from ash, and smoke stained the pure

white of his beard. However, Naruto bit back a curse as the man's pace increased.

The bastard's completely unharmed!

Naruto zipped forward in an awkward combination of his and Danzo's Shunshin and thrust the blue orb at the Shinigami's face. Taking a decisive step closer, Yamamoto brought his blade across in a horizontal sweep… and all Naruto could do was watch as it traveled under his arm and went to cleave his body in half.

Shikamaru finished his reply and sealed the scroll. Handing it over to Kumogakure's messenger, he gave a nod and dismissed the runner with a wave. The Kumo-nin saluted, then sprinted out to the balcony and dove over the railing. The Rokudaime Hokage sighed and leaned back into his chair, pressing his fingers together and letting his lips rest against them.

"You guys can come in now."

The door opened as Minato stepped inside, followed by Shino and Kiba.

"That took longer than the usual messages from the Raikage." Minato stopped in front of the desk and the other two fell in on either side. "Something's worrying him, isn't it?"

"That messenger-nin had a lot of worry on him." Kiba sniffed the air. "And he's already left the village. The guy's going to burn himself halfway there."

"Messenger ninja usually train for excessive stamina and break into relay teams for exceedingly long distances." Shino readjusted his sunglasses. "How do I know this? Because I did not dismiss my studies, Kiba."

"I thought your woman got you out of talking like that?"

"An old teammate encourages old habits."

Kiba rolled his eyes and grinned.

"You act like we haven't worked together since Team 8."

"Do I?"

"You two done?" Shikamaru looked up at Minato. "To answer your question. Yes, he's worried. They have had the same recent outbreak of children falling ill as Iwa. We have also had a few similar cases here in Konoha."

"It's not really an outbreak though, right?" Kiba shook his hands as he talked. "I mean we Inuzuka and our partners don't smell any sickness in them."

"And the Kikaichu of our clan do not detect any poison in the ill children."

"Kumo found something, which is why the Raikage contacted us." Shikamaru stood up and moved to the window to stare up at the clouds. "They found out in every case the victims chakra was fractured. What I mean to say is they are missing the spiritual component of the chakra."

"Any kind of jutsu would take the chakra in its entirety." Minato frowned. "This sounds uncomfortably similar to the technique Pain used on some of our forces during the Akatsuki attack."

Shikamaru nodded silently without looking away. He'd thought the same thing. The Amegakure leader had taken slow but deliberate steps to bring his country into the larger world. While they were still almost absurdly secure and solitary, trade had picked up with adjoining countries and their young ninja had become much more active in the chunin exams.

That did not stop everyone from being extremely wary of Nagato, and many still addressed him by his Akatsuki moniker out of habit or bitterness. It had taken many years for the other villages to forgive the strife he caused in his crusade, the Leaf more so than anyone. Only the constant reminder that the citizen's of Ame had suffered under the battles of larger countries in previous wars, and that the cruel disregard for their peace had led to the birth of Akatsuki, pacified those who suffered because of him.

Shikamaru did have to respect the man for sincerely striving to make things better for both his village and those he harmed. It did not prevent him from being suspicious though nor did it make him forget how dangerous the man could be.

"His technique removes the soul entirely. The symptoms do carry what seems like a logical outcome if that technique failed or was interrupted." Shikamaru craned his head to see them. "But this is the guy who almost leveled Madara's tower. I doubt stealing souls from kids would be difficult for him, and unless there is another Rinnegan wielder out there or another Death God, nothing we know of would give someone the ability to directly siphon someone's soul."

"Kushina told me the twins saw something the other day, and several other kids had seen it as well."

"The invisible creatures with glowing eyes." Kiba scratched the back of his ear. "I've overheard a lot of kids whispering about it, but haven't been able to pick up a trail or anything. Probably just them jumping at shadows."

"Shadows can be dangerous, Kiba. Why? Our Hokage is an example."

"Seriously man, I'm going to tell Yugao."

"What about you, Yondaime?" Shikamaru shoved his hands in his pockets and rested his back against the window frame. "You still have better knowledge about things relating to souls."

Minato let his eyes drift to the table. Shikamaru could almost see his mind flipping through an archive of old scrolls and notes. The Fourth sifted through information so quickly even he had trouble keeping up at times. If it wasn't for his superior strategic capabilities, Konoha would have suffered a major step back when Minato went into semi-retirement. The thought pushed him though, to be better, to measure up to the belief Naruto had in him.

"I would like permission to go inspect the remains of Madara's tower."

"You think it's still partially active?"

"I think you have a tower built entirely from the demonic chakra of the Jubi and you have a lot of variables. We also can't dismiss Madara's involvement. The Uchiha lived well beyond a human life, and we still don't know how."

"You think he did something."

"I think if there is the possibility of something demonic or supernal, the tower is the best place to start."

Shino gave a nod in agreement.

"Our clans have failed to find anything within the village, Hokage-sama. We will find nothing here."

"Alright, I was going to have the three of you work together to investigate the situation in Kumo. The same plan will work for this." Shikamaru returned to his chair. "The Yondaime is in charge. Go straight to the tower and come straight back with any information you may find. The victims of whatever this is are increasing. Time is not on our side. Dismissed!"

The last vestiges of his attack dissipated in the air, the flames having eaten most of it. The blade hovered an inch from his ribs, its wielders

arm gripped tightly by another's hand. Naruto's jaw dropped slightly as the Commander's eyes widened a fraction in surprise. Ichigo stood to the side of them like an immovable pillar, clutching Yamamoto's arm as the fragments of the energy restraints flaked off him like falling stars set against the midnight black of his coat.

When had he moved?

Naruto never saw anything except the fatal arc the blade traveled. There was nothing he could do. His Rasengan wouldn't reach in time and no block or Shunshin would be fast enough to get him out of harms way. He hadn't even had time to mutter a silent curse.

Ichigo was just… there. He didn't appear out of a high speed movement or jump in the way. He was there like he had always been standing there, his power eclipsing everyone. It wasn't wild or chaotic like before. No, the energy radiating from within him felt as assured and expansive as a full moon.

Then, it was gone almost as fast. His shoulders slumped as his knees struggled to keep him up, making the grip appear more like a crutch than a control.

"Yamamoto-san." Ichigo's head dropped and he squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm the one who caused all of this. Hueco Mundo and Renji and now all of this, I caused it. I will take Nel and we'll leave back to the human world right now. Please, I just - I don't want anyone else to pay for my mistakes."

Yamamoto scrutinized Ichigo and slowly relaxed. The Substitute released his grip and let his arm fall limply to his side. The aged Shinigami cast a look at Naruto, then doused the flames on the blade.

"Ichigo Kurosaki, you have a kind and loyal spirit tempered by a strong will. This has caused you to undergo many reckless actions, from invading Seireitei to charging headfirst into the enemy's stronghold. As you are still human, we have given you leeway and

allowed you to act on your own accord as a Substitute Shinigami, as both appreciation for indirectly exposing the traitor Aizen and because our goals largely fell in line. However, you will not be allowed to do so any longer. You are to remain in Seireitei until told otherwise."

Yamamoto turned on his heel as his cane reformed around his Zanpakuto.

"Keep the Arrancar with you or your party at all times and never let her out of sight. Gaara."

"Yes, sir."

"Have Kurosaki taken to the Fourth Division for treatment, and then find lodging for everyone in your division's jurisdiction. We shall speak more tomorrow."

The group watched as the Commander began ascending the steps to the barracks overlooking the courtyard. Naruto studied the light burns on his palm before clenching his hand into a fist. Twice, this was twice now he had been completely outclassed. The old man had toyed with him until the very end. Would it have even mattered if he reclaimed all his techniques?

"Why did you have Hinata guard me, Naruto?" Naruto didn't look back as the ex-Kazekage stepped up behind him. "Did you think I wouldn't notice your signal and her not assisting you? Why did you treat me like a potential threat?"

"That white overcoat of yours makes it difficult to know which way your sand would have gone."

"Naruto!" Naruto spun then grunted as Nel head butt him in the gut and grabbed onto his Shihakusho. "I thought you were going to die, and then that old man was going to come after me, and I would have been turned into a crispy hollow, and I would have died without pants, and-"

"It's okay, Nel." Naruto patted the top of her head and glanced at Gaara. The sand-users face tightened into an unreadable expression then he looked away. "Seriously, it all worked out didn't it? Please stop getting snot on my clothes."

"They weren't exaggerating when they said you had a habit of going toe to toe with people stronger than you." Karin frantically ran her hands through her hair. "Why didn't I stay at the farm? It was peaceful, stress free and completely devoid of danger."

"Karin-san." Lee took her hand and smiled brightly. "Thank you for staying with us to help Ichigo-kun. Your courage is only matched by your beauty."

She blushed furiously and twisted away.

"Do- don't mention it." She sucked in a deep breath and leaned back so she could see him over her shoulder. "You owe me dinner though."

Lee gave her a thumbs-up.

"It would be my honor, Karin-san."

Naruto watched as Gaara left down the hall, Nel skipping behind. The captain had told her he was going to take her clothes shopping while everyone settled into their new living quarters. Her excitement was infections, and almost pushed aside the fact he felt like dirt.

He should have known Gaara would have realized something was up, whether he saw the signal or not. Naruto's insides twisted into guilty knots. The look Gaara gave started like he didn't quite understand what he'd said, and then it clicked and hurt flashed in his raccoon eyes. Hurting a friend was the last thing he wanted to do, but Naruto didn't lie about not knowing where Gaara's loyalty stood. It would have been almost the same in their previous lives if Suna had allied with someone Konoha hadn't. The only difference would

have been that Gaara had been Kazekage and would never allow any harm to come to Konoha.

Here, the ex-Jinchuriki didn't have a choice.

Naruto shook his head and shut the door to his room. It was about the size of his old apartment with a large paper window that opened up toward a tall cliff that crept up out of the city. The room itself only had a table with a few chairs and a bed on the far side adjacent to small closet. He guessed the other door led to the bathroom.

"I'll have to see if we can get a futon so you can have the bed to yourself." Hinata dipped her chin as she faced the window, the tips of her ears reddening. "I can't believe they have the exact shortage of rooms necessary for us to have to share. I bet Gaara's doing this on purpose."

"I don't mind. I like it when we lived together before." She faced him and smiled with her eyes closed. "It felt like home."

He enveloped her in a crushing hug and rested his head on her shoulder.

"I'm so happy to see you again, Hinata." His body trembled lightly as a few tears escaped his eyes. "I thought I would never-"

She wrapped her arms around him, placing her head alongside his.

"I know, Naruto." Her own tears slid down her cheeks. "It's okay now. We're safe. We're together."

Author's Notes:

I actually managed to get this up on time. Trying to get back in the actual technical aspect of writing has been difficult (missed words, backward sentences). It has been like my hands can't keep up with my brain. It is getting better and my speed is coming back. I'm still a

far cry from 6 pages an hour (creeping just past 2 right now), but progress is being made and it no longer looks like Twitch plays Pokemon wrote things.

Anyway, those who can be reunited have been and the lines are being drawn in the sand. Now to ratchet up the intensity.

See you next week.

Defined

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 7:

Uryu Ishida sat anxiously in the Fourth Division's medical ward. Rukia and Chad were too injured for Urahara to risk healing them himself. Instead, he had transported them directly to Soul Society. A soft biting laugh escaped Uryu's lips. If only his father could see him now, once again in the Shinigami city accepting their assistance.

He wasn't too concerned with the miser. Ryuken had served his purpose by restoring his powers. It didn't really matter if he kept a promise to that man anyway. No, Uryu's pride as a Quincy was more important than the wishes of someone who turned his back on all of it in the name of money.

His pride demanded he be there to fully explain to the Shinigami what happened to one of their own. While he owed nothing to them as a group, he did owe his life to Renji Abarai and would honor the man by retelling of his heroic last stand. The circumstance was ironic really, given the bloody history between the Shinigami and the Quincy.

Still, there was no bad blood between Renji, or Rukia, and him. Their willingness to disobey orders to help save Orihime made them okay, despite the Shihakusho they wore.

"Ishida?"

Ichigo blinked as he trudged into the doorway. Uryu could feel how his normally impressive spiritual power hung low. How badly injured

had he been for his presence to be so diminished? How emotionally battered was he for it to be so solemn?

"I see you didn't fair any better than the rest of us, Ichigo." Ishida readjusted the glasses over his nose. "In fact, I seem to be the only one with minor injuries."

"Guess all your bragging about Quincy superiority was true." Ichigo's chuckle came across forced as he collapsed onto the edge of a spare bed.

"This time it came down to luck of the draw." Uryu studied Ichigo as he laid flat on his back and stared up at the ceiling. "Orihime, was she okay?"

"… Yeah."

They fell into silence, a hundred unanswered questions hanging heavily in the air. Uryu knew questions weren't going to help right now and there were probably few Ichigo could actually answer. From the bits of information he was given, their rescue attempt only served to kill two Espada and pick up a strange new Shinigami that annoyed, and unwisely fought, Genryusai Yamamoto. The general consensus from the whispers was Renji wasted his life.

"The Sixth Division will be holding a memorial service for him tomorrow morning."

"He deserved better."

Uryu dropped his head and stared at the polished tiles of the floor. His jet black hair fell down around his face and tickled his jaw line.

"I'm sure they will give Renji a proper send off."

"That's not what I meant!" Ichigo mouth twisted into a scowl. "There shouldn't need to be one!"

"We don't have a say in that anymore. That choice was taken away from us."

"It doesn't change-"

"We failed, Kurosaki!" Uryu's ice blue eyes glaring at the ground cut any protest short. "Our strength was abysmal in comparison to what we faced, and he died as a result. There is no disputing that, or arguing about how the things that happened shouldn't have."

He brought his hand within his field of vision. The skin tingled under the bandages as blisters and bruises gradually healed His bow, his Ginrei Kojaku, could fire over a thousand reishi arrows in a single moment and not one of them possessed enough power to kill the eighth Espada. Renji and he only survived because of the Arrancar's vanity. They damaged his clothes so he left to change. It was the ultimate dismissal and insult, and there was nothing they could do but be glad he left.

They didn't even pretend they could stand up to Ulquiorra when he appeared to exterminate them. Exterminate - like pests, they were insects compared to the upper Espada.

"I'm sorry, Uryu. If we hadn't split up, if I had been there…"

"You would have never gotten to Inoue-san. Whether we succeeded or failed to bring her home, she now knows we didn't give up on her."

"You don't think things would have changed if we'd stayed as a group." The finality in Ichigo's voice ensured it wasn't a question.

"I think you're being selfish." Ichigo whipped his head around as Uryu looked up. The Substitute's face portrayed raw pain like he'd be slapped. "Renji didn't die for you. We didn't get hurt for you. All of us jumped into that hell to save Orihime and make sure she was safe. I never saw the look on her face when you appeared to rescue her, or that goofy smile she always had when she did something a little

foolish. None of us got to see that except you. You are the only one who saw what we all fought for."

Ichigo's teeth clenched and he focused back on the ceiling. Slowly closing his eyes, he sucked in a sharp breath and let it out between his teeth.

"You're right." Ichigo sat up and let his head droop. "I'm so angry at how stupid I was. I honestly thought rescuing Orihime would be like when we charged in here to save Rukia."

"I think we all did in a way."

They probably all felt similarly. When Rukia was falsely charged with treason, the odds were against them. Divided from the onset, there were many times when one person's reiatsu would disappear entirely. They won though. Perhaps, it was that victory that formed a bit of arrogance on their part. They could do the same thing again in Hueco Mundo. They could accomplish the same feat again.

"How are Chad and Rukia doing?"

"Unohana-san is seeing to them right now. In her hands, I'm sure they will be fine."

"Good, that's really good to hear."

Uryu thumbed the metal symbol hanging from a band on his wrist. His Quincy cross was the accumulation of his pride, the talisman that allowed him to focus his power. He knew Ichigo was still silently berating himself for not being stronger. Uryu understood that was the burden of being the strongest. The failures weighed heavier on the broader shoulders. However, they all underestimated their enemy and suffered for it. By some strange mercy, they were alive and it fell to them, all of them, to see things through.

"I'm going to get stronger and stop Aizen from destroying our home town." Uryu stood to his full height and headed for the door. "I'm not

going to allow any more victims, and I'm certainly not going to be indebted to a Shinigami longer than I have to."

"So can you explain to me why Naruto has a bunch of his Kage Bunshin running around the city transformed into different people?" Karin lifted her hands with a shrug. "I'm all for him surveying the area of course. You'd just think he would have done that before we actually entered this place."

"I was not aware he was doing so." Lee glanced around as they continued to walk side by side. "You can actually tell who they are, Karin-san?"

"A person's charka signature never changes under Henge. The same holds true for reiatsu."

"Most people are unable to sense energy so precisely."

"It was something I was born with. It can be a pain knowing everything going on around you all the time, but it's kept me out of trouble many times." She cast a sly grin at him. "And it comes with the perk of seeing the quality of your energy."

"Quality?"

"It's like looking directly at your spirit. Your true emotions, your power, the quality tells me all of that."

Lee scratched at his cheek and looked up as a light blush highlighted his cheeks.

"Do you lik- I mean, what is mine like?"

"Your energy is buried deep right now." She placed a hand over his heart and stared through him. "It's a lot like that Commander guy's, but yours seems more like a fire that gives life instead of burning it

away." She took a step back and gave a cute smile. "That's how I'd describe it at least."

Lee felt his face heat up and he bowed low.

"Thank you, Karin-san. I had always wondered what it would be like."

"Hey, hey, don't make such a big deal about it." She waved her hand embarrassedly. "You should have already had an idea of what it was like when you used chakra."

"My old body could never mix my physical energy with my significantly greater spiritual energy." He rose to his full height and beamed at her. "You are the first person to ever see it."

"You're messing with me."

"Not at all."

"I overheard Naruto talking to Gaara. You were on his final team that took on Madara, the strongest ninja in history. How the hell did you fight him?"

"I never fought Madara. I fought a subordinate of his, a shark man of incredible power. Unfortunately, I lost my life defeating him."

Her eyes nearly bugged out of her head.

"You beat Kisame Hoshigaki without use of any ninjutsu or genjutsu?" People walking by paused as the question came out as a shout. "How?"

"Taijutsu."

She stared at him incredulously. He found the look endearing, but couldn't understand why she found it so odd he defeated his opponent using viable hand to hand techniques. Of course, people used to doubt his ability to be a ninja who only used taijutsu. Yes, he'd forgotten about how unusual he was in the ninja world. it would

be surprising for someone who had not seen his growth, and to be fair, his innate… gift to diminish the risks of the Eight Gates was a large reason why he could succeed with only his body.

"Wow." Karin blew out a rush of air in a failed whistle. "Naruto, and even Gaara, I thought were incredible even for Jinchuriki. You and Hinata are probably even more so."

"It is merely the outcome of hard work."

"No Lee. You don't get it." The teasing nature from earlier slipped away as Karin hugged herself uncomfortably. "If Kabuto-sempai was Orochimaru's right hand, I was his left. Even with mental barriers in place, I knew a little about his regenerative abilities and the experiments tied to them. I didn't know how. I just knew of them. The timeline of events Jugo, Naruto, and I pieced together starting from Danzo conquering Oto to Madara's defeat could be off by entire months and it still wouldn't be possible."

"What wouldn't be possible, Karin-san?"

"Hinata's body." Karin's face tightened in sadness. "Orochimaru-sama introduced the alterations to his anatomy slowly, over many years in deliberate steps that took months of recovery each time. He never fully perfected the process, which is why his body kept breaking down into snakes. Danzo didn't know what the hell he was doing. The madman only saw the results, not the risks that needed to be carefully calculated nor the intricate processes necessary to ensure the proper outcome."

"You are saying Hinata was lucky."

"I'm saying she should be dead, or a grotesque lump of mutated flesh, or at best a drooling vegetable. If a miracle occurred and the procedure did work, she would have needed months, maybe years, to recover and halt the potential devolution. She was battle ready within days." She leaned in close, her warm breath lightly brushing

his face. "You guys don't realize how insane what you have done is. You don't realize how special you are."

The vivid color in her hair and eyes was so striking. Her scent almost had a light cinnamon quality to it. Had he ever been this close to a girl outside of a fight or training before? His heart skipped a beat and a nervous tremor raced through his veins. Why did his legs feel so fatigued right now? No, his entire body felt odd.

Was he getting sick?

"Am I making you nervous, Lee - kun?"

He gulped anxiously and shook his head in the negative as his face reddened. Her face scrunched up and she started to chuckle, then her shoulders began to shake, until she held her sides and was laughing so hard tears ran down her cheeks. He didn't know why, but her laugh put him at ease and the occasional snort made him smile.

"You are so innocent, Lee. No wonder your energy is the purest I've ever seen. I-" she stopped laughing and her fingers squeezed the fabric of her coat. "I've never been around many truly kind people. I guess it makes me a little overzealous. I'm sorry if I'm teasing you too much."

Lee placed a hand on her shoulder and gave thumbs up.

"Tease me as much as you like, Karin-san. Friends should be able to be overzealous around each other."

Her eyes watered up again.

"You really mean that don't you?"

"Of course."

He removed his hand as she dabbed her eyes with the sleeve of her coat. If he had been younger, he would have declared undying love for her like he had Sakura-san. Such a youthful blunder, but one he

still cherished. He knew better now. Being smitten, as Gai-sensei had called it, could pass quickly. For now, becoming true friends was more important. As his teacher had said, the rest would arrive as it needed to.

Gaara waited patiently from the shop's doorway as childish laughter filled the room. A flash of pink hair was quickly followed by green as the two girls raced between shelves of candy. While he appreciated the help when picking out a few clothes for his charge to wear, stopping for candy was a cost he didn't really want to incur. He supposed it was better than dealing with Nel pouting. Honestly, the Arrancar didn't even know what that was until two minutes ago.

It didn't really matter though. It provided another potential guardian for Nel if he and the others were called away. Granted, the child lieutenant, Yachiru Kusajishi, was known for sowing chaos within the walls of Seireitei. It was playful mostly harmless pranks, but still chaos that made many adults fear what she would come up with next.

And he allowed an equally energetic Nel to be mixed in.

"You look so tense, Gaara-taicho." Rangiku crept up behind him and peaked over his shoulder. "Who's the squirt running around with Kusajishi?"

"I'm sure word has already spread through the hell butterfly network. Besides, I doubt you missed the Commander's reiatsu."

"I wanted to hear the story from you."

"I'm sure the Commander explained it in an honest and respectable manner."

"I don't buy it. You've got that look."

"I don't have a look."

"Your chin dips down whenever something is bothering you." She walked around in front of him and put her hand on her hip. "Spill it."

Nel's eyes lit up as she sampled the piece of candy Yachiru handed her. She hopped from one foot to the other holding her cheeks as the other one laughed and danced alongside. How could someone once ranked third among the Espada be so enthralled by a simple sweet?

How could Naruto completely ignore he kept that information hidden?

He risked being labeled a traitor and executed, keeping what Naruto told them a secret. If Yamamoto-dono was furious with merely a child Arrancar, having one of the most powerful inside the city would have ensured all of their deaths on the spot. No, he did not leap headfirst into an unwinnable battle like his friend. That never meant he wasn't still trying to protect everyone with a method likely more successful than challenging the Commander. But because of that, Naruto felt the need for someone else to watch his back. His first friend, the one who exemplified all of his best traits, considered him a potential threat.

Something Naruto never once did with the Sasuke Uchiha.

"Maybe when everyone is settled in. I can make no promises."

"Gaara-"

"Run for it!" Yachiru barreled past them with an armful of candy, Nel following with a similar heist. "Master thieves never get caught!"

"Rodger!"

Gaara turned to the shopkeeper and offered an apologetic bow.

"Have someone deliver the bill to the Ninth Division headquarters. Sorry for the hassle." He moved away from Rangiku and headed out. "I need to get going."

"Yeah," she said softly as her eyes drifted to the floor. "Maybe next time."

He disappeared in a whirl of sand.

"Tighten up your movements, Naru. You're too flashy."

"Say that after you catch me, Sensei!"

Shikamaru sighed as the brown haired child leapt over his shadow with a happy shout. The Rokudaime's attack shot up vertically, snagging Naru by the sandal and flinging him into a nearby stream. The kid bounced across the surface like a smooth pebble then unceremoniously sank into its depths.

A girl of similar age came up behind, her red eyes focused on Shikamaru's back as her straight black hair fluttered behind her.

"Hiru, if you're going to let someone risk being a distraction, you need to react faster to the opening they make." His shadow caught her in the air and then halted his other two students as they flanked him from opposing sides. "Jiraiya, Tsunade, you two have good teamwork together, but you are sloppy coordinating with other people."

He flung them into the water in the same manner as the first.

Kushina burst out laughing as the children surfaced, drenched and looking like miserable kittens. Tsunade glared daggers while blowing bubbles as Naru tried to splash water far enough to hit their sensei while yelling about water jutsu. Hiru and Jiraiya remained silent while their eyes calculated the next move.

"Since all of you are already there, swim ten lengths of the training ground and then go directly into tree climbing." Shikamaru shoved his hands in his pockets with a grin as she walked up next to him. "They almost got the tag on me that time."

"They'll be able to graduate soon if they get much better." Kushina grabbed at her arm and hid her worry. "I know how eager they are to start doing missions and really growing."

"Our upper ranks have finally bounced back over the past three years, and we have plenty of active genin. These guys can season a little bit more. I'd rather they go straight into C-Rank missions anyway, instead of watching them weeding plants for half a year."

"I thought you had discussed the idea of giving those kinds of chore missions to Academy students."

"We are playing with the idea. It really comes down to how well the revamped curriculum bolsters new graduates' field readiness. D-Ranks have traditionally been used to solidify teamwork while still bringing in money for the village. If the new curriculum works well enough, new graduates won't need as much time before starting real missions. Then, we probably will split the current D-Ranked missions into E and D-Ranks. Regardless, it will be after these guys graduate."

Naru and Tsunade shouted back and forth as they swam harder. Kushina chuckled. Those two were always competing or arguing about something.

"You're doing a great job with them, Hokage-sama."

"It's just Shikamaru, Kushina-san, and all of them have good teachers at home." He shook his head as Tsunade attempted to drown her competitor, allowing the other two to pass them both. "Tsunade, Naru, another five laps."

Kushina smiled embarrassedly.

"I'm sorry. She's got my temper. Jiraiya is the only one of the three to get his father's cool head."

"She'll learn to control it, just like Naruto did. Naru will as well. Honestly, it's kind of nice having that hyperactivity around."

"It's not too troublesome?"

"I didn't say that."

The water bubbled near the shore and a toad climbed out onto solid ground. A scroll was tied to its back over the top of a dark blue vest. Kushina felt a lump form in her throat. Unless Minato summoned them, there hadn't been a toad outside of Mount Myoboku since Konoha fell. There certainly hadn't been any messengers.

"Hey, Hokage." The amphibian hopped a few feet. "I've got a message for you from the Great Toad Sage."

Shikamaru dismissed any anxiousness with a shrug and sauntered over to the toad.

She checked the children. Her lips curved up in a small smile as Jiraiya stubbornly inched up on Hiru. Tsunade swam furiously against Naru as fresh taunts echoed within the splashes. What would Naruto think of them? Tsunade definitely carried more of his outward traits, but Jiraiya held that same unwavering spirit everyone said her eldest possessed.

Everyone else said, it seemed like that was the only way she could reference her oldest. Everything she personally knew came from two unbearably brief meetings - meetings filled with him trying to be as understanding and gentle as possible. He calling her mom almost broke her heart. She had no right to be called that by him, but he was too damn kind for his own good. He was a wonderful person even when his own heart was getting torn up. He charged straight ahead, sacrificing his future as a true ninja should.

A ninja, it still caused a sense of pride to build up in her chest. It shouldn't. Being a family of ninja ruined her son's life. It made her bitter and hateful of wonderful people, people like the Sandaime. The

God of Shinobi on the battlefield and a grandfatherly figure to the entire village should deserve nothing but praise for his accomplishments and character. She couldn't help but resent him though, or even consider his second turn as Hokage a complete failure.

He let Danzo and the two Elders become too powerful. They committed genocide upon the Uchiha, children and all. Danzo rebuilt Root and took control of nearly every aspect of village security. They took her from her son. And the Sandaime just sat quietly and let them because he didn't have the energy to put his foot down and actually act like a Hokage. He didn't protect Naruto from loneliness.

It didn't absolve her though. She could have taken action and lopped Danzo's head off his shoulders while they stood in that office. Hell, maybe she would have gotten lucky and he would have revealed all the Sharingan on his arm. Outing him as a lunatic might have even kept her out of life imprisonment. At a minimum, she could have left Naruto something to show she loved him. How many times had she considered sending a letter with all of her thoughts, but let the fear of him rejecting her prevent it? For that matter, would Danzo have even let the message get to him?

You should have done better when you returned though.

She bit her lip as her nails dug painfully into her arm. Why did everything she do involving Naruto feel like the wrong decision? She hugged him and felt pushy and selfish. She gave him space and felt like she wasn't giving him the chance to lash out at her. She let him take the lead and felt like she let him die.

"Is this for real?" Shikamaru's voice cut over her thoughts. "Tell me his senility is affecting his ability to see the future."

When had he gotten so pale?

"Look Hokage, I don't know what's on that message, but I do know Ojiji-sama ain't never wrong when prophesying." The toad hopped

back to the edge of the stream. "You have a reply or anything?"

"No." Shikamaru rolled up the scroll and tucked it into his vest. "Tell the Sages I got the message."

"Simple enough."

The toad dove back under the water. Shikamaru waited for a moment, his face tight as a thousand thoughts played through his head. Suddenly, he whirled around and made his way past her.

"Kushina-san, you're coming out of retirement. Get these four to the academy and if you have any way, contact the Yondaime and get his team back here." He held his hand up high and twisted his fingers into a special seal. Four ANBU leapt out of the trees and landed around them. "I want every, and I mean every, ninja still able to function on the battlefield in the tower's assembly hall in the next three hours."

The four rushed out in separate directions.

"Shikamaru-san?"

"Get them back here, Kushina. We're already short on time."

For what seemed like forever, Naruto felt completely at ease. He didn't have to worry about fighting some enemy or training until he passed out. There weren't any scheming Danzo's, or bad relationships, or ridiculously bearded fire wielders. Maybe, it was because Hinata had snatched up his hand within minutes of them starting to walk through the city. Maybe, it was the relief of knowing Hinata and the others were okay. Maybe, it was the little ramen bar located in a discreet corner just off the central district, and it didn't taste half bad.

He didn't really care why, because for the moment, he was pretty happy.

"You're smiling again, Naruto-kun."

"So are you." He gave her hand an extra squeeze. "Any place you want to check out? Gaara says we can go anywhere except the other divisions' barracks."

"I found a place where we could commission them to make kunai and shuriken. Also, since the Ninth Division is responsible for a citywide magazine, it should be easy to have some blank scrolls made up for you."

"You used your eyes didn't you?" He stopped and looked down at her. "You didn't have enough time to scout out a city this size without them. You told me they just fixed them this morning."

She placed a finger against his lips.

"I need to truly master them this time, Naruto-kun. They are my mother's legacy, and allow me to access my strongest technique. Kurotsuchi-san says the risk comes from my energy as it grows more powerful, not their use."

What if you don't train? You shouldn't have to worry about it then.

He bit back the thought as it threatened to spill out of his mouth. No, Hinata had the right to make her own decisions. It didn't matter how the idea of her fighting again made him worry. The feeling was like a transparent glass splinter hidden in the back of his heart, small enough to ignore if he tried hard enough. It wasn't like she'd let him fight on his own, just like he wouldn't with her.

And everything pointed to them needing to fight.

There goes being at ease.

"You don't need to worry about me." Her soothing tone carried a gentle firmness as her hand cupped the side of his face. "I'm not the one who blows himself up on a regular basis."

Whether out of instinct or because he saw other couples as a child, he clasped her hand and lightly kissed her palm.

"You're right." Lacing his fingers within hers, he brought it back down to his side and began walking again. "Come on; let's see if these Shinigami guys have a clothing store. These baggy clothes are a pain in the ass."

"And they don't have any orange."

"Exactly!" His face lit up excitedly. "Hey, you should get a coat like your old one, or a battle kimono, or something else you want. We're not Shinigami so no need to dress like them."

"Battle kimono? You mean like the ceremonial Hyuga garb or… Danzo's." Her voice squeaked out as even her hands reddened.

"I- uh- no, um- I was just listing clothing I had seen you fight in." That Sharingan stealing creep's choice still made him tongue tied. "Yeah, the one you had then wouldn't be good. Nope, too distracting."

"Di- distra- stracting?"

Damn it! Think then speak, think then speak!

"Sorry."

"Do- don't be." She tipped her chin down as the blush lessened. "It's okay if you find me… distracting."

"O- okay." He looked to the sky with an embarrassed expression. "So, that Ramen was pretty good."

"Yes, it was very good."

"It wasn't Ichiraku but I can deal with it for now."

"For now?"

"Once we kick this Earl guy back into a hole, I think I'd like to open my own Ramen bar."

"Do you know how to make ramen?"

"I know how good ramen is supposed to taste. The rest should be easy to pick up."

She giggled lightly into her free hand.

"Have you forgotten that time we tried to cook?"

He leaned over and kissed her gently before backing away with a grin.

"Not a chance."

"This whole thing feels like a waste of time, Yondaime-sama." Kiba tossed a charred stone down from his perch halfway up the rubble pile that once stood as Madara's tower. "Akamaru and I are only getting normal earthy smells. You know, that musty sent when buildings start degrading back to nature."

"My Kikaichu are also failing to detect any traces of chakra or other abnormalities."

Minato carefully scrutinized each stone as his lips dipped into a frown. He didn't know whether not finding anything comforted him or made the situation worse. It meant they didn't have to deal with Madara and biju, and the fact only the spiritual energy seemed to be disappearing in children left a very narrow range of options. Could Naruto defeating the Death God have caused repercussions after seven years? It seemed unlikely, even with the abstract nature of anything involving the soul. Even if it did have potential, there was no way to test it.

It wasn't like he could inspect the seal on his son's belly.

He shoved the bitterness swelling in his gut aside. They were in the middle of the unknown, and they didn't have the luxury of time to figure things out.

Kiba dropped down in front of him.

"There's nothing left here. Even the acid has dried up and faded, thankfully."

Minato nodded absently. All of Naruto's friends steered clear of the tower. While most ninja visited it as a great memorial to the heroes, for that group it served as a reminder of their loss. They only came once to help bring back whatever remains could be found. Kiba and Akamaru had the hardest responsibility attempting to find the bodies alongside Shino and Neji. For him, any smell played out like an active scene rather than a passive aftermath. The beast-nin performed his job bravely until he caught whiff of the acid… and hints of his original teammate within it.

Knowing how rapidly her seal vanished, Minato immediately realized what had happened. Shino, Shikamaru, and Kiba probably knew as well, but no one was willing to speak it out loud. Just as he spared everyone else what he'd witnessed of Lee and Naruto's final moments.

"I'm picking up a scent coming in fast." Kiba sniffed the air and Akamaru let out a low growl. "It's him."

The disdain lacing the last word told Minato all he needed to know.

Nagato, once feared as the Akatsuki leader Pain, leapt out of the tree line, landing far enough away to remain unthreatening. A midnight blue cloak had replaced the black one adorned in red clouds from before, and the scratch in his forehead protector was absent. However, the unsettling rings within his Rinnegan eyes still shown powerfully.

"Yondaime." Pain gave a respectful nod.

"Amekage." Minato reciprocated the gesture.

"You do not need to address me by my title. I do not deserve that level of respect from you."

"Damn straight," Kiba scoffed and twisted his nose up in the air.

"What are you doing here?" Minato forced himself to remain passive on the surface. "Did Hokage-sama tell you we were coming here?"

A few blades of grass shifted behind the orange haired man as a camouflaged Shino moved within striking distance. If Pain noticed, he made no action indicating so.

"I am aware of the malady harming the children from various nations. After investigating those villages directly, the trail led me here."

"There ain't anything here. Both my partner's nose and mine can tell you that."

"Perhaps a different set of eyes could tell you something different."

"You see something." Minato uncrossed his arms and let them fall to his sides. "Is it the tower?"

"The tower is nothing but a potent reminder of debris." Nagato pointed up in the sky above the spire's remains. "The Rinnegan blesses its wielder with the power over life and death, the ability to see a person's soul outside of their body. All over our world, there are weak patches, wounds, within the veil that separates the living and the dead. The largest one is here, where the clash of demonic energies weakened the barrier after it was torn open.

"Naruto's technique ripped open a hole to the afterlife?" Minato couldn't hide the surprise from his voice.

"No, I believe Naruto's seal was the gate. His technique only aggravated the effect."

Kiba switched back and forth between the two with a confused look.

"Huh?"

"You mean Naruto's seal was the catalyst?" Minato shook his head. "That's not right. The Shiki Fujin on his stomach had been used by hundreds of others. None of their deaths, mine included, caused this to happen."

"None of them ever came back to life, as you did."

Minato gripped his chin. He never truly died because he split the Kyubi's chakra and linked to Naruto. His eyes widened.

"The link, that's what was different." Minato refocused on Nagato. "Naruto's and my seals reacted to one another, pulling him into the Death God's belly with all the other souls. Naruto ended up killing it."

"Naruto killed a god?" Kiba shared a stupefied look with Akamaru.

"The Shiki Fujin summons the spectral being to take the soul of the user, the victim, and in the case of Naruto, fill the vessel. When the task is done, the seal should be complete and close access between the spiritual plane and the physical." Nagato made a fist to emphasize the point. "Your link prevented that, and by killing the Shinigami, his soul must have retained some type of connection to the spiritual plane."

"That can't be it." Minato shook his head. "I saw the door in the Kyubi's cage that linked Naruto to the Death God disappear. We're missing something."

Pain looked back up at the sky as his eyes watched something only he could see.

"We also cannot dismiss this tower originally served as the final resting place for the Rikudo Sennin." Nagato tilted his head as their faces fell in disbelief. "What, did you think Madara chose this spot at

random? Regardless of how, the greatest wound is above this and it is what is causing the others to form. What the bigger concern is, for everyone, is how we survive."

The grass waved again as Shino shifted his weight uneasily and Akamaru whimpered.

"Explain."

"These creatures are only susceptible to my attacks if I use my Rinnegan to place my spiritual energy at the forefront. That is an ability only I possess as the holder of the doujutsu that controls both life and death." Nagato's eyes almost seemed to glow as the sun began to dip into the tree line. "While I do not have the power to defeat the larger ones fighting to tear through the wound, I can repel them if I were to reconnect myself to a broadcast machine like I did in my original body."

"What are you saying, Nagato?"

"I am saying if the gate completely comes down, the only possible safe place will be within the barrier I construct. I am saying everyone must come to Amegakure."

Naruto steeled himself as he stood outside Ichigo's room. He knew what he wanted to accomplish and carried a vague idea of how to do it. The problem was making sure it worked. The kid was in a vulnerable spot and that could work out to his advantage or make everything blow up in his face.

"Not like worrying about it is going to help," he mumbled and stepped inside. "Hey, Ichigo, got a minute?"

"Naruto?" Ichigo sat up and blinked. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be out catching up with that woman, Hinata right?"

"She's getting dinner with Nel right now. Besides, we're roommates so we'll have lots of time together." Ichigo quirked an eyebrow and Naruto frantically waved his hands in denial. "It's not like that!"

"You're adults. What you do is up to you." Ichigo's face remained stoic even as a light blush crept up on his cheeks. "So what's up?"

"I wanted to talk to you - find out where your head is at."

"I lost my cool a little while earlier. I'm okay now."

"I'm guessing you're still trying to figure out a way to sneak out of here and back to Hueco Mundo."

Ichigo's eyes narrowed a sliver.

"How do you guess that?"

"Because it's the same thing I would do."

Naruto sat down on the bed across from him. Ichigo wasn't outwardly pissed so that was a good sign. The Substitute seemed to be sizing him up more than anything, like he didn't know whether he was being baited. Naruto couldn't blame him. He'd already been placed under something similar to a house arrest. No one could say the Shinigami wouldn't try to limit him even more if given a reason.

"I appreciate what you've done for me, Naruto. You kept Nel safe and saved me." The youth's reiatsu rose slightly. "But you don't know enough about me to make assumptions."

"Did you know my Kage Bunshin, my clones, relay their memories to me when they dispel?"

"No, I really don't know much about any of your techniques, other than that you are still trying to adapt them to your soul."

Naruto rested his forearms on his knees.

"I sent them out shortly after the old guy tried to roast me. You're right. I didn't know enough about you."

"So you asked around."

"Yeah. You care a lot for your friends and charge headfirst into danger if it will help them. You invaded the city and beat several captains in spite of barely understanding your own powers. You did the same thing trying to rescue Orihime."

"I had to."

"I know. In every story I hear about you, it always comes down you jumping in without being aware of your opponent's strength, and that you always have succeeded through sheer guts. That's why I know you are planning to go back and will try again as soon as you get the chance."

"You don't think I should." Ichigo swung his feet over the edge of the bed. "You think I should leave her there at Aizen's mercy."

Naruto stayed completely relaxed as Ichigo's voice rose. He needed to clamp down on his normal instinct to get loud and out-shout the person arguing with him. He'd been there. From Jiraiya's question to Hinata's kidnapping, he understood how the liquid burn built up in the pit of your stomach until you almost go crazy if you don't do something. It was so much easier to act than think, to move rather than wait and prepare. He needed to remember the patience Ero-sensei had with him and his outbursts.

"I think you have time. I think instead of hoping that your real strength will show up through pure determination and desperation, you use this opportunity to get better."

"We have no idea how much time that is. He could get bored with her and then what will happen? He stabbed his own lieutenant when he no longer needed her." Ichigo shot to his feet, his torso leaning forward slightly as his emotions boiled over. "She worshipped him

and he discarded her and called it a mercy. You keep telling me she's okay, but you don't know. Every minute she's with him gives us less and less chance to get her home safe. You don't get that! You can sit there and act all wise and collected because you don't get what it's like to have a friend who could die because you're stuck sitting around!"

Ichigo's body shook as his fists clenched by his sides. How many times had he been in a similar state? Sasuke before the training trip, Sakura on the hospital bed, and so many more times in between. Should he share his own challenges? Would it sound patronizing or help establish common ground? Yes, he had to use that experience now. He needed to convince Ichigo to understand that history.

"When we were alive, well, more alive, Hinata and Lee were captured by a man named Danzo. You have to understand in our world certain people carry what we call kekkei genkai. These bloodlines range from unique jutsu elements to special eye techniques, like Hinata's. Danzo was obsessed with kekkei genkai."

Ichigo relaxed slightly as concern began to overwrite his anger.

"None of us new exactly where he had taken them. All we had were a long list of possible bases. It was excruciating not knowing if he would hide her away, locked up and used for breeding like some kind of machine. Would he figure out how to duplicate her eyes and just harvest what he needed from her? Would the same thing happen to Lee? All I wanted to do was to charge in and start tearing every base apart until he had no where left to hide."

"You waited though?"

"I made a plan and built a team. I didn't do it because I was told to. I'm not very good at that sort of thing. I did it because it offered the best chance we had to get them home safe." Naruto rolled to his feet so he faced Ichigo directly. "I get your heart is in the right place and how frustrating it is not doing anything, which is why I'm not telling you that."

"You're telling me to come up with a plan."

"Exactly, and your plan should be to get strong enough it doesn't matter what number an Espada has."

Ichigo looked away with a bitter scowl.

"I've already achieved Bankai and can use my hollow mask. There aren't any more powers to gain."

Naruto shook his head with an understanding smile.

"Don't gain, dig into what you have."

"You saw what happened with Nnoitra. I threw two of the strongest Getsuga Tensho I could at him, and it did nothing."

"You threw two blasts with two completely different characteristics." Naruto grasped Ichigo by the shoulder. "Your control sucks as bad as mine did as a kid."

"You fixed it?"

Naruto gave a huge feral grin.

"Want me to teach you how?"

Shikamaru sat silently as orange gold beams of sunset shone through the windows lining the tops of the walls. He readjusted his hat for the tenth time in as many minutes. How the Sandaime always wore the hat and robes escaped him. The only times he put the garb on was when ceremony called for it, or when he needed a visual aid to show everyone he meant business. When the hat came on, everyone knew the laidback genius was taking a backseat to a fully serious Hokage.

Almost all the ninja of chunin or higher knelt down before him, the others were either on security detail or out on missions. The faces

had changed drastically since he was a young chunin amongst them. The Kyubi's final rabid onslaught had taken so many.

"Hokage-sama." Kakashi wheeled up beside him. "All available ninja are accounted for."

"Thank you, Kakashi-san." Shikamaru pulled the toad's scroll from his sleeve and held it up for everyone to see. "I received this from the Great Toad Sage. In it, is the first prophesy he has had since Madara Uchiha acquired all nine biju and disrupted nature itself."

He waited for the surprise to leave everyone's faces.

"All of us have been through hardship. Our brothers and sisters born in Suna faced the destruction of their original home. Some fought against, and all witnessed the destruction of our village in the final genocidal rampage of the Kyubi no Yoko. We all felt the loss of those we cherish… and our heroes." That photograph by his desk flashed through his mind. "The senior ninja carried us to the safety of the Uzu base, and the next generation was hardened by those three years. All of us have triumphed over these hardships, and because of that, you have proven you will not falter, you will not hide; you will not run when your village, your family, needs you. You have earned the right to hear the Great Sage's words in their entirety."

Shikamaru unrolled the scroll and clenched the parchment firmly, being sure to keep any sign of trepidation or fear hidden. He was Hokage, and as the leader, he must be the eternal calm that would lead his forces. He needed to portray absolute faith within the compassion. That was his role. That was what they silently required of him when asked to go out to die.

"I see them come, a wave of beasts hidden from eyes of flesh, beasts with the endless hunger possessing a swarm of locusts. They come from the veil beyond life, steeped in death. They come within the cycle of the moon. Man and beast, spirit and summon, all things blessed with souls will live as prey and fall as grain. So this I have foreseen.

Yet, these heralds precede the true calamity. Entwined like serpents, a man of hate and a man of arrogance shall trample upon the heavens and the earths, rending life and nature into nothingness. The Child of Prophecy shall suffer in these final moments, the past darkening his light, his hope stolen by the man of hate. Not him, nor his lineage, shall stand before the two men before these events transpire. So this I have foreseen.

I have foreseen the end of all days, and recorded these final moments alongside my final breaths. I do not presume to be able to change these events, but the fate of worlds continues to swirl fiercely around the Child of Prophecy. If any salvation is to exist, his light must not be darkened. Only the Will of Fire is capable of that."

Author's Notes:

I am interested to see everyone's responses in particular of Naruto's parents, the Toad Sage prophecy, and Naruto taking on teacher esque role. I had fun writing this chapter, and even felt alright with how the romantic/flirtatious sections came out. Those aren't really my strong point.

See you next week.

Revealing

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 8:

"This should be out of the way enough."

Naruto's mouth opened slightly as Ichigo led him into an expansive cavern. Settled beneath a mountainous hill towering from the center of Seireitei, rocky outcroppings marred barren brown ground, then shot straight up to an artificial blue sky that illuminated the cavern in fake-natural light. He could catch the scent of a hot spring somewhere further in. It wasn't forest or a grassy training ground, but it would work for what they needed.

"I'm surprised no one is here using this space. It's a lot bigger than Gaara's training grounds at least."

"It's a secret area Urahara-san built. Only a few people know about it."

"So most of these Shinigami don't have the destructive powers of you or that angry old fart?"

"I think the higher seated members from each division have their own favorite spots outside of the city. Besides, the barrack training grounds aren't that small for practice purposes."

Naruto shrugged. Compared to the open fields dotted all over Konoha, the scattered dojo, courtyards, and outdoor training yards were all pretty tiny. Sure, they probably worked alright for basic combat, but anything big would go beyond the boundaries pretty quickly.

"I guess ninja just move around more."

"I guess." Ichigo grabbed the pale cloth wrapped hilt of his blade. "Alright, how do you want to do this, Naruto?"

"What?" Naruto folded his arms over his chest with a grin. "You're not going to call me sensei?"

Ichigo glanced over his shoulder with a disbelieving look.

"Seriously?"

"Nah, I'm messing with you." Naruto reached down a picked up a rock. "Get that technique of yours ready. I want you to use your weakest possible blast on this when I toss it up in the air."

Ichigo jut out his chin like he wondered if Naruto was kidding. Pulling the blade away from his back, the bandages acting as a sheath unraveled and exposed the body length blade. Styled like a glorified kitchen knife, the simple design only served to highlight the razor sharp edge coursing down its entire front side. The blonde flung the stone high up and Ichigo swung in lazy arc, bright blue reiatsu condensing at the sword tip then exploding out in a wave.

The rock completely disintegrated.

"Okay, now throw the biggest blast you can manage on this next one."

Ichigo gripped with both hands as Naruto threw a similar sized stone up. A larger crescent shaped blast enveloped it into nothing and sailed by undeterred

"I don't mind playing baseball, but this doesn't seem to have a point."

"I have no idea what that is." Naruto stretched out his arm. "As for the point. You don't get it."

"That's what I just said."

"No, the point is you don't understand why I had you do this. Can you tell me anything different between the two blasts?"

"Their shape, maybe the speed a little bit."

"Did you feel different throwing them?"

"Not really. I told you when we met I have a lot of reiryoku. As long as I don't get hurt, I could probably throw full powered Getsuga Tensho for several hours without getting tired."

"You're missing what I'm getting at."

"Look Naruto, I know you are trying to help. I really do."

"But."

"How is any of this going to fix my control, or are you going to teach me more than that?"

Naruto stuck out his bottom lip. This was karma wasn't it? Ero-sensei had put up with all of his denseness so now it was his turn. Or maybe if some crappy grand plan existed, this was why he found himself here instead of peacefully resting in the afterlife. He could sympathize with being hardheaded and not understanding concepts simple to other people

Sighing, he pushed a small amount of energy into his big toe and picked up a pebble with the digit.

"Control starts with being aware of how much chakra- energy you are using. With a little bit, I can grip objects without physically grabbing them." Naruto let his energy flow out unrestrained. "If I don't pay attention and force it with no direction -"

The pebble cracked and shot off his foot, pegging Ichigo square in the forehead.

"Ow!" Ichigo clutched his head. "What the hell was that for?"

"I had no idea what that pebble would do. You get the idea?"

Ichigo wiped the smudge with the back of his hand and gave a sharp nod.

"You're saying since I can't tell how much I'm putting in, I have no way of knowing what my Getsuga Tensho will be like." Ichigo brought his Zanpakuto up and rested it on his shoulder. "I'm guessing the same thing happens to my reiatsu, which is tied directly to my fighting ability."

He at least picks things up faster than I do.

"Exactly. From what I gathered, when you rescued that Rukia girl, your power was initially so high you defeated three lieutenants with your bare hands, shattering one of their Zanpakuto with a single punch. You even completely outpaced a very talented Captain from what I heard."

"Byakuya, yeah, in the beginning I overpowered him. It didn't last though. My body couldn't keep up with my Bankai back then."

"You'll have to tell me about what that is later." Naruto rolled his neck around, earning a few pops. "The idea I'm putting together though is your power hasn't reached that height since then."

"That's impossible. I have control over my hollow mask now. That enhances my powers a lot more than they were."

How did Ichigo still not get the point he had no idea where his power stood? No, patience, he had the perfect example to enforce what he was trying to get across. In a small way, it was reassuring some of that dumb luck from his past still popped up every now and then.

"Nel made a friend yesterday, some Yachiru girl. While they were running around causing trouble, they bumped into the girl's captain."

"Kenpachi Zaraki."

"Yeah, that's the guy. Nel told me how insane his presence was. She said his reiatsu was so high he would have been able to cut through Nnoitra's Hierro." Naruto jabbed a finger toward Ichigo. "All the gossip claims you beat him. I believe that was before your mask or even that Bankai thing. Now, there're only two possibilities for why he could beat the creep that thrashed us. He's gotten way stronger much faster than you, or you aren't accessing your real power."

"He's stronger than when I fought him, but not a lot." A tight grin tugged at his lips as his head sunk. "You can't be in the Ninth Division barracks and not sense him over in the Eleventh. So, even with two major boosts, I can only manage to be a little stronger than a few months ago."

"Yeah."

Ichigo's eyes glimmered as sadness crept within their serious gaze. Naruto felt his admiration for the kid grow a little. Finding out you slid backward sucked. It almost made Lee give up back when they were kids. Sure, Ichigo seemed incapable of not picking himself back up. Naruto got that in the short time he knew him. The difference now is he wasn't brushing it off, ready to charge in and hope for the best. He was learning through the disappointment.

"I don't want to sound pathetic, but I really can't see what you could teach me when something like Bankai is barely helping."

Naruto scratched his chin as his face shifted to a contemplative expression.

"You're thinking about it wrong."

"How so?"

"You've had teachers Ichigo, and probably, almost anyone in this city would be better for teaching you how to use your Shinigami powers better. I don't know if it is even possible for you to learn any jutsu or the control techniques I know."

"Kind of killing your credibility here."

Naruto laughed.

"I want you to think of this as training, not learning. Not to sound arrogant, but nobody tops me when it comes to that. Ero-sensei took me from the dead last to the best. He taught me everything he knew about identifying and fixing my weaknesses."

"How?" Ichigo stabbed his blade into the ground. "I'm not giving up, Naruto. I believe you aren't the kind of guy to make promises you can't back up. But I need to know how so I can focus on a goal."

"Shape, size, speed, and strength." Naruto held up a finger for each corresponding word. "If you can control all four of these qualities at will when you fire your Getsuga Tensho, you will have full access to your power."

"Okay." Ichigo pulled his sword out of the ground and held it out in front of him. "Let's do this. Get the next rock."

"That was just a test to see if you were aware of the gap between your intent and the actual result." Naruto scratched the back of his head. "I think we've solidified it's pretty sad."

Ichigo bit back any retort.

"What am I going to do then?"

"Show me how high you can raise your reiatsu. No techniques, no mask, I want you to unleash everything you've got."

Aizen traced his thumb along his brow, wiping away a bead of sweat. How many centuries had it been since he needed to exert enough effort to perspire?

Another higher class hollow knelt down at his feet and he activated the Hogyoku again. Blinding light encased the beast for an instant as the air rumbled. Quickly, the newly born Arrancar stood and was escorted down the hall to his left where the Earl waited to begin the dark matter transfusion.

This new plan could not be more different than his original one. He had sought only the strongest hollow, placing his Espada as the backbone of his forces. Allocating time to finding and crafting powerful warriors over disposable foot soldiers was a more efficient method. However, after witnessing the boon a successful transfusion provided a normal hollow, the term disposable no longer applied. The infused Arrancar were still no match for his Espada, but it would neutralize all but the upper leagues of the Gotei 13.

They came in droves now. Any sentient hollow who heard the message being carried by his heralds traveled to his Las Noches palace. Led by the promise of power, his army grew by the hour. Yes, this force would assure Seireitei fell. They could not defend the city, the human world, and mount a counterattack against him. The Shinigami counted in the thousands. His forces would limit that number to dozens. Genryusai-dono would only send a Shinigami to their death if they could take down the enemy with them. These new creations would not be taken down by any but the strongest.

He looked down at Orihime in the courtyard beyond the balcony. Ulquiorra stood to the side as a silent sentinel. The girl feared him enough to obey, but found him comforting enough to function unhindered. Given she'd already been assaulted prior to Ichigo Kurosaki's pitiful rescue attempt, and Nnoitra's increasingly erratic outbursts, having an extremely loyal Espada guarding her provided a much needed element of security for the girl.

Nnoitra, his prideful number five would likely need to be culled soon. It would unfortunately leave three openings within the Espada, openings unlikely to be filled with the rabble filing in. In the grand scheme, the first four numbers were more than enough. Having a full ten only provided the flair of the dramatic.

His attention returned to Orihime as her knees buckled. Kisuke Urahara made a poor miscalculation attempting to keep her off of the battlefield. They underestimated how much strength she truly had. Three hours without break and she still continued. Yes, her fear of losing protection drove her, but the effort remained the same. However, progress still eluded her.

It was a simple task in theory. They placed a small hollow shaped statue on a pedestal. If it were damaged, she no doubt would have already rejected it back to a complete state. What she was asked to do though was quite the opposite. She needed to reject the statue's very existence. Granted, her sole offensive technique already did this on a basic level, but it acted as more of spear that pierced. What he required was no less than complete dissolution of anything within her shield.

"It is like switching the ends of a magnet." The Earl walked up beside him and peered down. "Her pacifistic nature fully materializes in her passive powers."

"It is there within her. Can you not see how we are only getting wisps of her true ability, my friend?"

The Earl chuckled humorlessly.

"I see hesitation in every breath and apprehension on every contour of her pretty face. Wisps or waves, it does not matter. Merely attuning her energy to our needs will be enough for the true power source to activate."

"You are building a device to magnify her Shun Shun Rikka." Aizen nodded as Orihime's orange shield surrounded the statue again. "And where will this gift need to be placed to assist our Shinigami friends?"

"Within the walls of Seireitei itself." The gray man grin stretched impossibly wide. "I leave that part of the plan to you, my future ascendant."

"How much time will you need?"

"We will need a great distraction."

"I see." Aizen watched as the shield faded and the statue remained unchanged. "Entering should not be too difficult with access to a Garganta. The question is the force."

"I will be going, and I have one weapon to assist as well."

Aizen's gaze flicked over to a gangly shadow sulking in the courtyard archway.

"I believe Nnoitra would appreciate the chance to work out his frustrations." Orihime's shield shimmered to life again. "Perhaps, a chance to get out of this desert and get some fresh air would benefit me as well."

Orihime's fingers clenched as her body shook - a sharp crack echoing throughout the palace walls as the statue gave in.

Gaara sunk into the chair in front of Yamamoto's desk. While expected, he had hoped for any meeting or reprimand to have waited. His own thoughts were jumbled more than he cared to admit, and as a captain leading others, he refused to let anyone see mental duress. The refusal pertained to Yamamoto especially. The aged Shinigami had no tolerance for indecision.

I need to be resolute in my words and actions.

"I will get straight to the point, Gaara no Suna." Yamamoto rested his elbows on the desk and clasped his fingers over the bridge of his nose. "Can these travelers you brought in be depended on to fight alongside us?"

"Yes."

"Hoh, have you forgotten the one who forced me to release my Ryujin Jakka?"

"Naruto Uzumaki is someone you can trust."

"Yet, he defends an Arrancar."

"He protected a friend." Gaara's stare didn't waver as Yamamoto cracked an eye. "Yamamoto-dono, you have lived longer than I can comprehend. I will not pretend or assume what experiences have shaped you into who you are outside of knowing that you do what you have found is best for Soul Society. However, I do know what motivates Naruto. He was always alone, always ignored. So he will fiercely protect his friends as a result."

"I do not dispute that is an admiral quality. I dispute his choice of whom he deems a friend."

"When we first met, you requested I explain who I was and where I was from. You know my history. You know how the Suna villagers originally feared me for what I carried. Naruto was no different. More importantly, Nel is no different. You judge her based on what, not who, she is. I agree we should be cautious and prepared for a trap, but I don't believe we should automatically label her an enemy."

"I allowed her to be placed under your authority. That is all I am willing to do for the time being." Yamamoto opened both eyes fully beneath his bushy white brows. "We are getting off topic. How do we know this group will join our ranks?"

Gaara tilted his chin down in thought. There was no guarantee. Lee seemed the most eager. Hinata would likely join out of indifference, but his fellow Jinchuriki made it very clear he had no interest. They hadn't put a good foot forward threatening Nel, and Naruto wasn't likely to forget that anytime soon.

"I don't know if they will all join. I do know we're on the same side."

"For now. Loyalties change, Gaara. His efforts to counter you during our tussle fail to demonstrate this trust you spoke of. He was your friend at one time correct?"

"I'd like to think he still is, Yamamoto-dono."

Yamamoto let out a contemplative grumble and leaned back. They sat in silence for a moment, Gaara shoving the unwelcome gnawing in his gut back down. He needed a chance to sit down with the blonde and talk, or even shout it out. They were friends. He knew from watching his villagers, friends fought at times.

"Being a leader once yourself, I would like you to take a look at this." Yamamoto pushed a thin folder over the polished wooden surface. "Then, with all of this information, construct a battle plan."

"Wouldn't the more senior captains be more eligible for such a privilege?"

"Few of them have engaged in war, and none of them have the same knowledge of these newcomers. Now, read and then explain a plausible plan."

Gaara picked up the folder and lightly flipped it open. His eyes widened as they studied the files. So, this is why Hisagi was removed from his division. Protocol 00 - it was a bold plan, and given the uncertainty in the war ahead, probably necessary. Most of the Shinigami were lower seats that showed some potential. However, his own lieutenant stood at the top of the list alongside the third division lieutenant Izuru Kira and above them Captain Hitsugaya. Which meant… the Tenth Division was now going to have to be led by their lieutenant Rangiku until a replacement was found.

"Did you just shudder, Gaara?"

"No, sir." The sand-user closed the file and slid it back. "The Third and Fifth Divisions already lacked captains. Removing Lieutenant Kira and another captain seems like a heavy cost, and risky."

"Mayuri has calculated those three alone will nearly match the entirety of the current Gotei 13 when they are done with this process. The potential their Zanpakuto carry may be beyond any other in Soul Society. Disregarding that, the added years will still intensify their reiatsu and make them far more powerful."

"If there is anything left to protect of course."

"Yes, that is the dilemma. Do we ensure a strong Gotei13 in a bleak future, or do we keep them here as deterrents who may die in a battle we may not be able to win?" Yamamoto stood and trudged over to the balcony overlooking the city. "I have already promoted my lieutenant to temporary Captain of the Fifth Division. He is more than qualified. Ukitake will be sending one of his lieutenants to handle day to day operations for the Third Division. Now, what say you, Gaara?"

"I believe Naruto has begun training Ichigo Kurosaki. Given Naruto's lineage of teachers and rapid growth in our world, I would let them continue. The same goes for Rock Lee and Hinata. All of them are experienced ninja and know what they have to do to recover their strengths. I would utilize them as a special detachment apart from the Gotei 13 as much as possible."

"And if they resonate with the artificial Zanpakuto?"

"I trained in your Academy and under Rangiku Matsumoto because I felt it best to fully embrace being a Shinigami and blend it into my ninja skill set. They will more than likely remain ninja only, and their companion spirits should acclimate to that." Gaara climbed out of the chair and moved up next to the Captain-Commander. "I would keep Kurosaki's friends here and have them train with us. The fact they survived Hueco Mundo means those three could become potent variables in a short period of time."

"I had considered that as well, particularly in regards to the Quincy."

"The real question is whether we strike first and invade Hueco Mundo in force or wait and engage Aizen when he arrives in the

human world to feed the Hogyoku. As for Protocol 00, is there a way to speed up the process?"

"No, any faster and the risk increases drastically. Besides, they would still be recovering when the war began."

"You could place them in the Dangai."

Yamamoto paused. Gaara knew bringing that up was stepping on fragile ground. It wasn't forbidden by law, but then no one had ever been granted permission.

"Doing so carries significant risk to all involved and is taboo."

"Yes, I am aware of that." Gaara nodded. "It still needed to be mentioned."

"I will take your words into consideration, Gaara no Suna. You are dismissed."

Gaara bowed respectfully and headed for the door. There was another factor at play, and one he could not bring up without more evidence. That feeling, the creature Naruto mentioned when they were travelling to Seireitei, still lurked out in the darkness. It could strike when they were weak from battling Aizen, and they knew nothing of its power other than it unsettled them.

They all agreed it was up to them to fight it.

Minato exited the colorless world of the Hiraishin, pulling Kiba, Akamaru, and Shino from it as well. The dog whined and rubbed at his nose as the other two discreetly tried to regain their footing. The jutsu always took some getting used to, something exacerbated by being a guest. For them, they were at the base of the ruined tower only a second ago. Now, they stood in front of the village gates.

"I'll go talk to the Rokudaime." Minato walked into the village. "Good work on the mission."

Akamaru gave a short bark.

"I know, Akamaru. I don't feel like we did much either."

"It does not detract from its importance, Kiba." Shino shoved his hands in his pockets and headed down an opposite road. "You know this."

Minato leapt up to the nearest rooftop and made a B-line for the Hokage tower standing proudly above the rest of the village. Their discussion with Nagato carried on well into morning, and it made all of them eager to get home. The big question would be how Shikamaru took the news. He had, admittedly, overstepped his authority by not having the Amegakure leader talk directly with the acting Hokage. The shadow user wouldn't be concerned with that though. It was the aspect their primary hope likely rested in the hands of the man who once attacked the village. Madara betrayed him, but many still felt Pain shared some level of responsibility for the Kyubi's rabid onslaught.

Landing at the balcony leading directly to the office, Minato saw the edge of an ANBU's mask dip back under the eaves.

"I'm glad you decided to warp back here instead of walk, Yondaime." Shikamaru called out as Minato stepped inside. "What have you found out?"

"The creatures are pure spiritual beings, from the other side of the veil separating life and death." Minato pulled up a chair and nearly collapsed into it as the post-mission fatigue set in. "The largest tear is above Madara's tower, and it is forcing smaller ones to open."

Shikamaru cursed and rubbed his face. The younger Kage had bags under his eyes, and the disheveled papers littering his desk and floor

had innumerable scribbles and scratches. Had the attacks on the children increased or was there something else?

"Is this tear visible or was it your team's specialties that discovered it?"

"Neither, Nagato arrived after dark last night. His Rinnegan has picked everything up. He also filled us in on what's going on in Kumo and Iwa."

"What's he have to say?"

"These entities can only be harmed by spiritual energy. Our chakra is capable of this to a small degree, but the physical component dulls our attacks and makes the damage negligible. He can side step this with his Rinnegan. However, he claims it is inefficient and won't work against the bigger ones trying to come through."

Shikamaru grumbled and tossed a scroll at Minato.

"It is the last thing written by the Great Toad Sage." Minato unrolled it and quickly scanned the dark letters, nausea increasing with each line. "Yondaime, with this prophecy and your information, I can say without exaggeration that we are facing extinction."

Minato resealed the scroll and handed it back. He couldn't argue. The biju, and even a near omnipotent Madara, were still chained to the physical world and could succumb to jutsu. This enemy defied the natural laws of their world… of life itself. They could attempt to find the two men and kill them, but that wouldn't close the tear.

"Nagato did discover two traits that may give us chance."

"I'm listening,"

"The first is that only the strongest of the creatures he's encountered have any impact on the physical world. The children he saw in Kumo woke up after a week in all but one case. That child actually had her

entire soul removed, and suffered physical wounds from where the creature struck. When he hunted it down, it damaged trees and left tracks during their fight. The others struggled pushing past leaves."

"So most of the children will be okay?"

"Yes." A tired smile flashed over Minato's lips. "These things don't want spiritual energy. They want souls. What we've seen are failed attempts to feed on them. The children will be okay."

"It also means they have to kill us before they can get to our souls." Shikamaru's eyes lit up. "Our physical bodies insulate us from their attacks the same way it dulls jutsu."

"No, what Nagato discovered is that a body masks a soul. The creatures barely paid any attention to normal civilians. Which brings me to the next trait, the child who died was the strongest in her class and all of the children attacked were enrolled in the academy. By making chakra, we gain greater spiritual power, which attracts them."

"And they go after what they sense out of instinct." Shikamaru rubbed his chin. "No, the stronger one that killed that girl would be able to sense the other children. If she was the strongest… they go after the strongest soul they can!"

"Yes, that conclusion makes the most sense." Minato leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees. "Shikamaru, the weaker ones can't permanently harm anyone. The only ones capable of causing physical damage will seek chakra users."

"You read the prophesy though. Everything with a soul will be consumed." Shikamaru cupped his fingers in their signature pose. "If you think about it though, he wrote all things would be prey, but not all things would fall. That leaves a strong possibility they won't go after civilians and other life until they have consumed ninja forces and have no choice but to feed on weaker souls."

"Exactly."

"You and Nagato want to bait them."

"He wants all the ninja villages to rally in Amegakure. He is confident he can create a barrier that will repel the creatures until we find a solution." Minato watched as Shikamaru closed his eyes as his brow furrowed. "The working theory is that having all of us in one spot will draw our enemy away from everything else. Civilians can be sheltered in safe houses and bunkers warded by special sealing tags I crafted using Nagato's spiritual energy. They're not strong, but should be enough of a deterrent to keep the weak ones at bay."

Shikamaru remained silent, lost in thought. Minato knew how quickly the Rokudaime was shuffling through and altering plans. Scarily intelligent, deceptively powerful, and unnaturally patient, this was the young man Naruto placed his faith in, and the young man who proved he deserved the title of Hokage. A lesser leader would have been consumed by title and ability, but Shikamaru remained humble and laid back. After the nightmare brought about from the last council, it would have been easy to solidify himself as the sole authority. Instead, he increased the council's size and made permanent the temporary group Minato had set up. Instead of merely using the eldest ninja, he chose from area of expertise.

Minato remained onboard as his top advisor. His father, Shikaku, sat as the secondary advisor. Sai led and represented the ANBU, while Kakashi kept track of the Academy and anything inside village walls. Honestly, every year they became less needed, and soon would be unnecessary. However, Shikamaru continued to turn to them. He didn't do it out of insecurity or patronizing respect. He did it because he recognized the value of other opinions and to eliminate the risk of missing something.

"I have already shared the scroll with all of our ninja chunin and higher. I will think on what the Amekage has come up with. Go home and rest, Yondaime. Whatever plan we decide on needs to be put into action immediately. The end of this lunar cycle is in three weeks."

"I know you can still raise it higher, Ichigo." Naruto shifted his weight to one foot. "That's not as high as when you fought that guy Nnoitra axed."

"I keep telling you. Bankai raises my power five to ten times what it normally is."

"And I keep telling you, you should be able to match Nnoitra's energy without it."

Ichigo clenched his teeth and pushed his reiryoku through his system again. A light blue aura flared to life around him and he gripped his Zanpakuto tighter. Naruto was right. It felt different against Grimmjow and Zaraki and those other moments. The energy poured out of him then like it would have been impossible to reign it in. His reiatsu was always leaking out uncontrolled, but those times, it was like a waterfall.

Come on damn it!

The energy flickered and steadily dropped. He stopped and let his shoulders sag. His body felt like jelly. Why was this so difficult for him to get a handle on? Sure, he normally learned best through combat, but that was kind of what led him to this wall right now. The fact he always assumed the power would manifest instead of making it manifest cost him his chance to save Orihime.

"I can see how frustrated you're getting. Don't."

"Easier said than done." Ichigo inhaled sharply through his nose an prepared for another attempt. "I will get this."

The energy surged again, whipping up a breeze that pushed Naruto's hair back.

More, come on, go higher!

His reiatsu leveled off lower than last time.

"Higher, Ichigo."

"I'm pushing as hard as I can. I don't get why it's not increasing!"

"Figure it out then."

"I'm trying."

Naruto moved up close and stood inches outside of the blue bubble.

"Trying? You mean like you tried against Nnoitra and Tesra? Seemed to me like you were only lashing out in desperation."

Ichigo's eyes narrowed as his aura flickered.

"I never once thought about losing or giving up. I never stopped looking for a way to beat them. I didn't run away."

"You were passed out and broken. You didn't do anything."

"Quit trying to piss me off, Naruto. Using anger to raise my reiatsu doesn't work."

"I'm not trying to piss you off. I'm getting you out of your own head." Ichigo's power lowered as confusion washed over his face. "You're so convinced you can't manage your energy you don't even realize it's become an excuse. You know you have the power, but think it will just come flying out of your ass when you need it. You tell yourself you aren't angry or scared because the power will show up. Unlike the rest of us, who spent years honing our energy, learning to use our emotions or push them aside, you just jump into an enemy stronghold waving your sword around like some damned idiot."

"That's-"

"You're not unable to summon your power because it can't be controlled. You're limited because you arrogantly believed you were too powerful, and some teacher always had some new power upgrade available to cover up that weakness."

"I…" The power almost dissipated completely. "That's not why-"

Naruto grabbed him by the color of his Shihakusho and pulled him up onto his toes.

"No! Don't you dare lower it again. You have the guts and the strength. Stop telling yourself it isn't possible or you don't know how, and start making your power do what you want it to do." Naruto's grip tightened as his face scrunched up in a mix of anger and sorrow. "You don't want your friends to die? Then you have to be able to summon your full power at will. Now, quit being a little bitch and let's get on to the real training."

Naruto let him go and moved back to his original spot.

Ichigo swallowed the lump in his throat and squeezed his eyes closed. His chest ached and it felt like his nerves were trembling under his skin. The words stung, every truthful syllable stung. For a moment, all his strength left him. He was the little boy crying in the rain again, not knowing why his mother's blood pooled round his knees. The child who waited out in the hall as his father explained to his younger sisters that mom wasn't coming home again; their sniffles giving way to full sobs. The sad boy who walked through the halls filled with pitying stares and hushed whispers.

He was the teen staring at his unconscious family lying at the feet of a hollow moments before Rukia gave her powers to him so he could save them. He was the inexperienced Substitute Shinigami, kneeling battered in a lonely field as the hollow who bragged about killing his mother escaped. He was the defeated hero who watched helplessly from the ground as the Shinigami took Rukia back to Soul Society to be punished for treason. He was the powerless soul, terrified his spirit would be consumed and hollowfied before awakening his true Shinigami powers.

He was the weakling who couldn't stop the Espada from hurting his friends.

Ichigo brought his sword up as light flicks of his blue aura appeared and disappeared.

He was the man who charged into Soul Society. He was the warrior as the scent of battle filled his nostrils and he clashed with Kenpachi Zaraki. He was the friend who achieved Bankai in three days to save the one who risked everything so he could protect his family. He was the Visored standing in the middle of Hueco Mundo with Grimmjow beaten at his feet.

Ichigo shouted like the sound originated from within his very spirit, the cavern shaking as his voice became louder and raw power erupted around him.

Naruto's eyes widened as he watched Ichigo's reiatsu take on its visible manifestation, constantly climbing higher. The aura swelled, stretching out several times Ichigo's body length, swirling furiously as stray arcs snapped in the air and tore chunks our of the ground.

Naruto gripped the ground with his reiryoku as the expelling force almost toppled him over.

This is what I'm talking about!

He shielded his eyes as the vortex intensified and any rock formation near it crumbled and dispersed. If dirt wouldn't get caught in his teeth, he would have been grinning ear to ear. He knew it, as much as he hated yelling at the kid, he knew it. And Bankai would multiply this higher? How much would the mask push him?

The cave quaked continually, threatening to collapse, as the power reached a plateau and held in place.

"Alright Ichigo, memorize what that feels like and slowly bring it back down. Do your best to control how fast you bring it in."

After a moment of hesitation, the energy lessened. It was choppy at best, but Naruto could tell Ichigo had already gotten the idea. Should they do this until he could do it smoothly or jump into the next phase? The second stage might be easier with more practice. No, Ichigo would still have a difficult time with it.

The energy settled at Ichigo's normal output. The orange haired youth's chest heaved as sweat dripped off his chin.

"Why?" Ichigo tried to get his breath under control. "Why are you taking the time to train me? I know you're really strong, or at least, you will be once you get used to being a soul."

"You don't want me to?"

"No, I do. I just need to understand why."

"This isn't my fight." Naruto released his hold on the ground. "I won't risk losing my friends for you."

"You aren't going to help?"

"I'm going to keep my friends safe. Sacrificing ourselves once was enough." Naruto waved his hand dismissively and forced a smile to his face. "Don't worry about that though. You did awesome!"

"Thanks. Your inspirational speeches suck."

"Hey, it worked didn't it? It's been almost seven hours. Let's go get something to eat."

Ichigo unsteadily began to follow Naruto out.

"Do you have any teaching experience or are you making this up as you go?"

"I've taught someone before."

"What'd you teach them?"

Naruto jabbed his pointer fingers together.

"Oiroke no Jutsu."

"Sexy technique?" Ichigo's eye twitched. "What are you some kind of pervert?"

"That technique got Ero-sensei to train me."

"So he was a pervert?"

"He was their king."

"Why do you sound proud of that?"

Uryu remained stoic on the surface and kept his posture rigid as his nerves caused the hair on the back of his neck to stand on end. He left the tea cup untouched on Yamamoto's desk. It was difficult to see the distinction between invitation and command with Shinigami. The messenger had said it was a request. The two escorts from the First Division arrived to escort him before he answered.

"Do you hate us, Uryu Ishida?" Yamamoto sipped at his cup. "There will be no repercussions for your honesty."

"If you are referring to your genocide of the Quincy two hundred years ago, no, I understand your reasoning. While they are my kin, you spent hundreds of years warning them their powers completely eradicated hollow and would risk upending the balance between this world and the human world. They chose not to listen."

"You have still not answered my question."

"My grandfather sought peace and wanted Quincy and Shinigami to work together in harmony." Uryu readjusted his glasses. "For many years, I thought you Shinigami purposely let those hollows kill him because of that. It wasn't until my battle with Mayuri Kurotsuchi I

learned the Shinigami who watched him die were under his orders. I'm left feeling… conflicted."

"An understandable reaction. Although, your tone strikes me as quite calculated rather than emotionally driven."

Uryu shifted slightly as the man set his cup down on the desk.

"I am trying to be reasonable. Mayuri is a psychopath, but I understand how valuable he is." Feeling calmer, he reached out and picked up the cup. "I don't know if I will ever share my grandfather's desire to be allies. However, we both want to stop Aizen. Working together would be a more efficient method of dealing with him."

"And after?"

"What can one Quincy do against the entirety of Seireitei?"

Okay, that was a little bold on my part.

"One Quincy can do immeasurable damage. The progenitor of your people, Yhwach, was a monster that required me to found the Gotei 13 in order to oppose him."

"I am not as powerful as the sealed king, and I now owe my life to one of yours. As long as you do not attack me, I will remain on peaceful terms."

"That is not a viable solution anymore."

Uryu felt his nervousness return. If they didn't want peaceful terms, why the meeting and the tea? Was it poisoned? Wait, he had to calm down and think.

Get more information.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I have seen how potent your combination with Ichigo Kurosaki has become. It reminds me of a time when I called Yhwach friend and we fought hollow side by side. I wish to see your grandfather's dream realized." Yamamoto cut off Uryu's protest by lifting his hand. "I will not apologize for the past, but we must look forward to the future."

"What?" Uryu hesitated as caution struggled against curiosity. "Would you propose?"

"Just as we took the first steps that solidified our two peoples as enemies, so to must we take the first steps to making amends." Yamamoto climbed to his feet, the stooped shoulders doing little to disguise his imposing presence. "Through the millennia, we have collected and catalogued many things lost to your history. It is yours. Examine it all, learn how to improve your strength, and train alongside us as our true ally, Uryu Ishida."

"Man, I can't believe you couldn't feel it outside. There must be some type of seal or barrier to hide it away." Naruto fell into the chair at their kitchen table as Hinata shut the door behind her. "It was incredible."

"I'm sure I will get to see it soon."

"You're going to be impressed. I can't wait to start his real training and see what he can really do."

The sun barely glowed over the bottom edge of the windows as night settled in above it. The blonde stretched back in the chair and folded his hands behind his head. Did she bring it up? He was so happy right now, and dinner had been great. She didn't want to ruin it. No, this needed to be put out in the open.

"Naruto-kun, today when I was practicing with my eyes. I saw you and Ichigo talking."

"Huh, you can still see through things?"

"Yes." She moved closer and looked down at him with concern. "Why did you say this wasn't your fight?"

He froze for a moment then his blue eyes drifted to the floor and his face fell. Bringing his arms down to his lap, she felt the happy atmosphere completely plummet.

"You read my lips?"

"Yeah." She stepped closer and almost reached out for him. Instead, her hand fisted at her side. "Why would you say that? Why would you say you wouldn't put us at risk?"

"Hinata, I…" He trailed off.

She had known something had been off about him, not specifically but a feeling of him not being right. It wasn't the extra attention and tenderness he'd showered her with or the shock of being alive in a foreign world. His spark wasn't as bright as it had been. She'd thought she was imagining it. That she placed too much importance on his off handed comment about opening a ramen bar and didn't really see the subtle differences. Naruto wasn't the kind to bring it up himself. It fell to her to help him open up.

"Naruto, it's okay." Her tone was firm yet gentle. "You don't have to hold it in."

"I guess I feel like this is a Shinigami problem so the Shinigami should deal with it. This Earl guy is our problem."

"That doesn't sound like you at all."

"When I'm done with him, Ichigo should be able to handle it."

"I understand he needs to fight his own battles, but the Gotei 13 don't have the forces they need." She cracked a smile. "Naruto, it's too early for me to become a nagging wife. You don't need to keep things from me."

"I don't think you could nag if you tried." He reached out and grasped her hand with a shuddering sigh. "I know the chances of being in a Madara situation again are slim. I'm still not willing to risk it.."

"Naruto, we-"

"When I'm in Sage Mode, in a way I am connected to every living thing." His hand trembled as it held hers. "It's all kind of a sixth sense, and I could see you and Lee in a strange kind of way."

Her heart sank.

"You saw us die."

"It's deeper than that because I focused on you both." She had to use her other hand to steady his in spite a small brief smile. "Sensing you, how kind and loving your presence is, it's like being completely connected to this warmth. I knew you were hurt, you were suffering, and then you were gone. That warmth disappeared, and it left a cold absence."

Tears trickled down her cheeks as she knelt down and rested her head on his.

"I felt the same thing happen to Lee. I saw Madara crush Kakashi-sensei's spine." His voice cracked and he paused to lick his lips. "My final attack ripped me apart one cell at a time. I woke up in the void and watched that fat gray bastard separate us. I was alone again."

He angrily wiped away his own tears.

"We died. It should have been it. We gave up our future. I never got to know if one day you would marry me and build a family. We never got to see our dreams so Konoha and everyone could be safe. I was okay with that. I am proud of that." He was nearly shouting between sniffs. "And then, we get a second chance. By some miracle we show up with the opportunity at having a future again. Lee finds a girl he likes, Gaara has never been happier. We're finally together again

and actually have the chance to spend time together like a real couple. Less than a day here and we're told we have to fight in a war we have nothing to do with? These Shinigami, some maybe even as powerful as freaking Madara, are scared of this Aizen and his army. I mean are you kidding me! That's what we get after everything we've been through? More people who want to kill us, more time putting our lives on the backburner, more sacrifices we need to provide. I'm not willing to do that for strangers anymore. I'm… I can't handle you dying again."

Hinata's breath caught in her throat. Soft tears silently fell as the warm droplets pelted her feet. She understood his fears. She'd felt a similar apprehension when they entered Madara's tower. How much worse would it have been if she'd seen him die? For him to be afraid - was being close all she could do?

"I'm sorry. I've been so focused on my eyes, and enjoying being with you and everyone again, I didn't notice how you were feeling."

"No, no, I'm sorry, Hinata." He pulled away and looked up at her in a panic. "I haven't asked what you're thinking or feeling about all of this. Instead of being a good partner, I'm sitting here whining and being selfish."

"You shouldered my feelings during both my exile from the clan and the aftermath of Danzo's experiments. And isn't that what we're supposed to do? Support each other when things get too much to handle alone?"

Realization played out over his face and a soft chuckle escaped his lips.

"There you go saying the right thing again." Standing up, he rested his forehead against hers. "Thank you for putting up with me. I feel better."

I know he is saying that so I don't worry.

"I'm glad." She tilted her head back and smiled up at him. It was her turn to take his mind off his problems, like he had for her so many times. "So, you want to marry me?"

He hopped back and waved his hands furiously with an equally intense blush.

"I- I- I was blurting out everything faster than I could think about it." He paused and his eyes widened. "Not that I don't want to marry you. What I mean is um, I."

She giggled as he sighed and hung his head in defeat. There, that was the Naruto she loved. The infectious energy that could light up any room. The goofy man with a big heart who would always look after his loved ones. He would work things out when it really came down to it. Despite claiming it wasn't his fight, he wouldn't be able to help himself. Naruto wasn't capable of ignoring someone in need.

"I think we should take things one day at a time, Naruto-kun." She clasped her hands in front of her. "Let's focus on regaining our strength. Any decisions can wait."

"Okay, you're right, Hinata."

Her smile became more teasing.

"So, how big a family did you want?"

Author's Notes:

This chapter was a little more dialogue heavy than I preferred. Although, I am largely happy with how it turned out after some tweaking to the more dramatic sections. I am interested to see your responses in regards to Naruto's mind frame and hope I seeded the previous chapters well enough it didn't seem to come out of the blue. Don't worry, I won't be making him super angst ridden. However, a big draw for me was the idea of how the characters could grow

further. How they would deal with a second chance burdened by similar (or greater) threats. I'm hoping the progression is realistic while staying true to the characters themselves.

Had some repairs to do at the dojo so I lost my writing time Saturday. I should be able to still get the next chapter up Saturday, but March is a crazy month event-wise so I ask for you patience if I am a day or so late.

Embers

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 9:

"Shall we begin, my future ascendant?"

Naruto slurped down a chopstick full of ramen as Ichigo ordered another bowl. Good, the fact Ichigo's appetite had increased steadily over the past week meant his energy reserves were being used and needed to be replenished. As frustratingly slow as progress had been on the control issue, at least Ichigo wasn't unknowingly holding anything back. It still took most of the day to tire the kid out, but he did tire.

"Between the two of us, Gaara-san is going to go broke." Ichigo took the new bowl from the ramen chef. "We could at least eat in the Ninth Division barracks so it didn't cost as much."

"Lee already asked if we could help out or do some odd jobs. Gaara told him to keep focusing on training."

"You two still haven't talked since we got here?"

"Been busy." Naruto pushed his empty bowl away. "I'll talk to him when I get a chance."

"Just don't use me as an excuse to avoid him."

An excuse? He hadn't really thought about it that way. Ichigo certainly took up the bulk of his time, since training started directly after breakfast, and outside of a short lunch, straight through to

dinner. Dinner and after was dedicated to Hinata - and Nel if she wasn't attached to Yachiru's hip. Occasionally, Lee and Karin joined them, but never Gaara. Naruto always assumed the ex-Kazekage never slept much. The sand-user's long hours running his division cemented that belief.

It didn't change the fact one or both of them could be making a better effort. Naruto wasn't sure if he felt guilty. Of course, hurting Gaara was never something he wanted to do. It was this place though. It seemed hell bent on drawing lines in the sand and forcing them to pick a side. Gaara seemingly embraced that and couldn't understand why he couldn't do the same.

Bah, he had other stuff to worry about.

"Don't worry, you're not an excuse." Naruto leaned back and patted his belly. "Come on, hurry up so we can get back to your training."

"I'm still not convinced we can call it that."

"Training without danger is like trying to cook without fire."

"That sounds made up."

"I said the same thing to Ero-sensei once. I woke up that night in a bandit stronghold full of missing-nin searching for me."

"That's crazy." Ichigo readied his chopsticks. "Regardless of how you want to explain it, I can't argue with the results."

"You can max your reiatsu and lower it to normal. There's still a whole lot of middle before we call anything progress." Naruto grinned as Ichigo grumbled under his breath. "You're getting better at dodging fireballs though."

Ichigo slurped a retort. Naruto spun around on his stool and watched as Shinigami shopped around the assorted shops. As much as he ragged on him, the kid was starting to get an idea of how to change

between the four qualities. Ichigo used the desired aspect eight out of ten times. He was steadily keeping up with every modification as well, without even knowing it. Naruto had to pat himself on the back for what he'd come up with. By getting his fuinjutsu functioning back to acceptable levels, it opened up an entirely new realm of possibilities and Ichigo was reaping the benefits.

The concept behind the training was simple. He had thirty Kage Bunshin apply themselves with two seals. The first one was a color coded identification seal requiring a specific quality from Ichigo's Getsuga Tensho. The blast was always too powerful for the clone to survive whether it was correct or not. However, if it was the wrong quality, the second seal activated and triggered a random penalty, anything from fireballs to kunai… from all the remaining clones… at the same time.

The requirements started out with accepting anything remotely close to what the color asked for. If it was kind of crescent shaped when striking blue or a wave when striking green, it passed. If it was a little faster hitting red or slower when hitting yellow, it passed. The same applied for size and strength. As the training progressed, he secretly demanded more. Crescents needed to be sharper, waves bigger, speeds more precise, whatever quality indicated by the color required more exact responses. Hopefully within another week, he could start forcing Ichigo to mix qualities. Within two, the clones could start moving and attacking, forcing Ichigo to react accurately in the middle of combat. All the while, the seals would need better attacks to be appeased.

Ichigo might catch on soon enough. The kid had a knack for picking up on things through instinct. Although, he hadn't noticed the slight changes to his own attack yet. What once started from the tip had slowly begun creeping down the blade's edge. If Naruto guessed right, the Getsuga Tensho may eventually be fired from the entire blade, or at least, the entire top cutting portion of the Zanpakuto.

The idea was almost as exciting as when he started figuring out how to add wind element into the Rasengan.

The air suddenly rumbled and the sky felt like it pressed down on top of him.

A cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck as more reiatsu joined the first and he struggled to take in a breath. The ramen chef collapsed behind the counter as other Shinigami buckled or passed out. He glanced over at Ichigo, the youth already on his feet with nervous wild eyes staring at the sky. His hands balled into white knuckled fists as his jaw tightened.

Naruto followed his gaze. The dark maw of a Garganta ripped open in the sky. Nnoitra bristled with a sneer as he stepped out into the sky, a goofy blonde kid with a huge purple sword hopping out next to him. Naruto felt his lips twitch into a grin. Ichigo's power almost matched Nnoitra. No, at its peak it might even be above it. If all hell was about to break loose, they needed to focus on the sadist. It'd be a good measurement, and if victorious, a confidence booster for the Substitute.

Three Shinigami strode out in the center. The one with the slick-backed hair and smug gaze must be Aizen. Was that his reiatsu they felt initially? Ichigo thought he'd get Orihime away from that kind of power? While it lacked the demonic taint of a tailed beast, it still ranked equally to the Kyubi's full power… maybe even closer to Madara. He'd need to be avoided for the time being. It was too soon for Ichigo to face him, and from his encounter with the crotchety Commander, the old fart would match him if he really cut loose.

Despite the fearsome power exuding from them, they didn't really bother him. It was the last two that exited the void. The one hidden in a tattered cloak barely gave off any kind of presence, but for whatever reason, the hints of energy felt very unsettling. Naruto could deal with that though. However, his throat tightened as the seventh figure bounced out and hung from an umbrella. The menacing eternal grin made his mouth run dry and a deep pit to form in his stomach.

It's him.

As if knowing right where Naruto was, the rotund gray man tilted his head down in his direction. Their glares locked for a moment, and the Earl's grin deepened.

"Good evening."

Gaara barely stopped his sand from instinctually striking out as a hand grabbed his haori and yanked him into an alley, pinning him up against the wall. His heartbeat quickened as Rangiku's sapphire eyes peered directly into his teal ones, her face unnervingly close - enough to catch the smell of persimmons on her warm breath.

"Talk."

"Rangiku, I'm-"

"No more excuses." Her fist tightened until the fabric creaked. "Don't brush me off again."

"I apologize. I've been busy."

"I know Hisagi has been sent somewhere with Hitsugaya-taicho. I get you have a lot more work to do, but I also know the difference between being busy and finding work to avoid people."

He gently grasped her wrist and attempted to tug it away. She gripped harder. This was the last thing he wanted to discuss. Protecting Nel, preparing his division, getting his friends acclimated into Seireitei, reconciling with Naruto, those things required his absolute attention. He needed focus, which was the thing her presence robbed him of. She distracted him, made him question a million things, and consumed the majority of his thoughts. Any talking or interaction could wait.

Yet, she would keep persisting until he relented. No matter how much distance he continually put between them, she still cared for

him enough to keep trying. Yes, he should deal with it now. At least, they could converse enough to appease her.

"What do you want to talk about?"

She blinked in surprise.

"That was easier than I thought it would be."

"You wouldn't let me leave if I didn't."

"Oh." Her chin dipped down as her face fell. "So it's me then… you don't want to be around me."

He disliked the unwanted ache that crept into his chest at the hurt tone her voice carried.

"That came out wrong." He let go of her wrist. "I'm sorry."

This was what he didn't want to happen. He wasn't supposed to be the one to make her sad or react emotionally like he had been doing so much lately. He was the near-constantly patient one. As Kazekage, it didn't matter if he was out of his comfort zone, or if there was tragedy. He kept calm as the pillar for everyone and his steady words reached for solutions. Since joining the Shinigami, he had the option of relaxing a bit and letting his defenses down - something she actively brought to the surface.

He couldn't afford that luxury anymore, not with that weight returning to his shoulders.

"Please, Gaara." Her bangs hung down, covering her eyes. "We used to talk all the time about everything. I remember how you'd get that slight exited tone in your voice when you talked about your family and friends. After finally meeting some of them again, I don't understand why you aren't happier. I don't understand why you seem to intentionally make less time to be around me."

How did he answer her? Honestly? That would work with Naruto and the others, if they could all get in the same room for more than ten seconds at a time. Answering the other question wasn't as easy. It would mean admitting things he refused to acknowledge himself, let alone her. Three years of history he cherished with her, possibly tarnished because his honesty would put unfair pressure on her and her conflicted emotions.

"I really like you, Gaara." She closed a few more precious inches between them. "What can't you admit-?"

The reiatsu struck first, so large and oppressive for a moment he wondered if an army was invading. She stepped back, her emotions and worries pushed aside as her calculating attitude surfaced. He couldn't admit anything to her. Not because of fear or disappointment, he could handle those feelings if they arose. Honestly, it wasn't because of him or lack of interest. It was because of her, and his consideration for her feelings.

As his senses attuned and the Garganta opened, the mass of spiritual pressures became defined into seven distinct presences. His attention focused on one man with perpetually closed eyes and a narrow chin that enhanced a tiny snake-like smile. Gin Ichimaru, the ex-Captain of the Third Division. The silver haired traitor who followed Aizen and knowingly assisted in his destructive plans. The child who saved, and grew up with, Rangiku Matsumoto.

The man who held her heart.

Aizen's smirk deepened as the captains and lieutenants of the Gotei 13 appeared before him atop the peaks of Seireitei's architecture. Some notable faces were missing, such as the young Toshiro Hitsugaya. Funny, he would have thought the Tenth Division leader would have been the first to confront him. The same could be said for Hisagi-kun and Izuru-kun's absences. Tosen and Gin were their respective Captains after all, and the bond between captain and assistant did not fade easily.

Ah, and that dark red haired man must be a new captain. I wonder which division was given to him.

"My, my, he promoted quickly." Gin spoke under his breath with a hint of amusement. "Rangiku-chan must be proud."

"Sosuke Aizen." Yamamoto jabbed his gnarled cane into the roof he stood upon. "What madness has possessed you to intrude upon Seireitei?"

"I was merely feeling homesick, Genryusai-dono. Do not fret. I realize I am your guest now, and as such I bring gifts." Aizen spread his arms out as hundreds of eyes appeared within the void behind him. "I have brought friends to amuse you."

He spotted the new captain grasp the Zanpakuto tied to his back.

"Jinn of all sands, born a prince and died a sage, stir in remembrance of your sacred word." The man drew the ornate dagger completely from the gourd. "Kakolookiyam."

The sediment exploded out of the sheath and surged around in a wide arc, shielding the Shinigami as a hundred Dark Matter enhanced cero fired out of the Garganta. The electrified purple beams exploded against the massive wall, tearing off chunks and kicking up sand laden dust.

Gin let out an impressed whistle as the haze slowly cleared, revealing the barrier's remains and an unblemished city beneath them.

"My friends." Aizen pointed down to the buildings. "Please, entertain our hosts."

The air shook as the concealed Arrancar roared. They blew past him in blurry streaks of speed and fury, raining down on the city and igniting destruction to anything, or anyone, within reach. Yamamoto

signaled and all the higher ranked Shinigami but a few gave chase into Seireitei.

"I must get going." The Earl began floating down as the cloaked figure followed suit. "I leave the rest to you, my future ascendant."

"I wish you success, my Earl." Aizen smoothed his hair back and grinned as Yamamoto steadily rose to their level. "Tosen, Gin, welcome the newcomers from the other world. Nnoitra, you may do as you wish."

"You will be going nowhere." Yamamoto unsheathed his katana, flames spewing down the blade's entirety. "Ryujin Jakka!"

The child Arrancar flew forward with an unintelligent groan, diving directly into the gigantic burning wall. The flames swirled and condensed around the boy until he disappeared from sight. The fire shrank to nothing and Wonderweiss emerged in his transformed state.

Undeterred, Yamamoto swung and unleashed another fiery torrent.

Aizen's muscles coiled in preparation for his next move. Yes, just a little more and he could strike. He no longer had the privilege to gloat and speak on the battlefield. Genryusai-dono, the most powerful Shinigami in history, alone possessed the power to derail everything should he be left unhindered. The aged leader was still beyond his power so defeat would be derived through underhanded means. Out of respect for the man, such tactics left a bitter taste in his mouth - but godhood would wash any lingering sensations away.

Wonderweiss grabbed the burning Zanpakuto edge, the flames extinguishing immediately. A dozen arms burst from the Arrancar's back, ensnaring the Commander's limbs. Aizen used his Shunpo to immediately close the distance and land a lethal blow.

The Arrancar gurgled crimson as Aizen's blade speared through him, the bloody tip piercing Yamamoto's chest. Tearing the blade cruelly

out through the Arrancar's neck, he leapt back from the murdered child and stunned Shinigami leader.

"I would be careful, Genryusai-dono. Your flames consumed by this Arrancar are about to be released all at once."

Wonderweiss' body bulged, tongues of flame licking out of burgeoning cracks. The Commander's eyes widened and he barely managed to pull the corpse above him as it erupted. Through sheer force of will and spiritual pressure, Yamamoto repelled the explosion upward even as his own body was consumed.

Still, Aizen knew there hadn't been enough power collected to kill him. Actually, the current blast might not even be enough to slow the old Shinigami down and merely singe his beard. He couldn't take that risk.

"Seeping crest of turbidity. Arrogant vessel of lunacy. Boil forth and deny. Grow numb and flicker. Disrupt sleep. Crawling queen of iron. Eternally self-destruction doll of mud. Unite. Repulse. Fill the soil and know your own powerlessness." Aizen brought his hand down. "Hado Ninety: Kurohitsugi!"

Surrounding the First Division Captain as he exited from the dwindling flames, pure reiryoku formed an onyx coffin as pikes of energy stabbed into the box, and finally crashed down into the ground like meteor. Aizen watched detachedly as rubble from the smashed buildings buried the fading attack.

"That should buy a little time."

Karin caught Nel in a diving roll an instant before one of the strange Arrancar decapitated them both. Finding her feet, she pushed Nel behind her legs as the creature cackled. Tesra may have been the only Arrancar she had seen, but something was seriously different with this one, no, with all of them that were attacking. The little skin showing was dark gray, bordering on black. The mask fragment,

covered the upper part of its face and appeared more like armor than bone, shining as bright as the sharp teeth lining its gums.

The monster aimed its palm at them as dark purple energy crackled to life.

"Cero."

Nel rushed out in front of Karin, stretching her arms wide and sucking in a deep breath. The energy morphed in the vacuum and harmlessly entered her mouth. Nel gulped it down, puffed up her cheeks, and fired the blast laced with her own energy right back at their attacker. The opposing Arrancar shrieked as the cero struck and eradicated him in a potent explosion.

"Ew, ew, ew." Nel whined with her tongue stuck out of her mouth. "Ith, tasthes nasthy."

Karin's jaw hung open as the charred remains of dead Arrancar collapsed on the battered ground. Insane, this little girl was insane. At best, she'd hoped Nel and she could both escape with a little luck. At worse, she would have managed to dodge the blast and then distract the Arrancar long enough for Nel to get away.

The child destroyed it instead, and was now licking the ground.

"Nel, stop that." Karin rubbed her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut.

There were so many signatures she couldn't pinpoint anything well enough to find safety, and she couldn't risk focusing to find one person. The enemy moved too fast and were too numerous to avoid them entirely - and a hidden knife wasn't going to do much of anything. She bit lightly on her lip. They were on the very edge of the central business district since Nel had wanted to get lunch with Ichigo and Naruto. The good thing is she could tell they were nearby. Unfortunately, the district had quickly devolved into a warzone. Any distance, no matter how short, was almost too dangerous to attempt,

especially since the Shinigami were too busy protecting each other and supporting their weaker ranks.

"Karin, my throat hurts."

"You swallowed a cero, Nel."

"It never bothered me before. This one was different."

Karin whipped around as a new tainted presence landed behind them.

"So, you have allied with the Shinigami, Nelliel Tu Odelshwanck." Kaname Tosen slowly walked up the street. "I do not understand why you left us and are now a child. However, witnessing you here, in flowery garb you purchased from this city, I cannot abide letting you live."

"She's just a kid, jackass." Karin pulled Nel behind her again. "Leave her alone."

"Aizen-sama raised her up from a pitiful hollow. If she is not with him, then she has no right to her life."

He disappeared in pure speed, reappearing in front of them with his Zanpakuto ready to strike. Suddenly, Tosen ducked as a kick whipped across where his head had been a moment earlier. He blurred away again as another foot came down in a powerful stomp, fracturing the tiled street.

"Forgive me, Karin-san, Nel-chan, I let myself get carried away." Lee stood to his full height as five battered Arrancar fell down around them. "I will stay by your side from now on."

"You made me worry, Lee-kun." Karin smiled as his comforting presence filled her senses. She nodded over at Tosen. "Careful, I think that is one of the traitor captains."

"I see." Lee sunk into his fighting stance. "Please, stay back you two."

"You do not possess a Zanpakuto?" Tosen brought his sword up. "Are you one of the ninja from another world?"

"I am." The ground cracked as Lee blasted forward. The ex-captain barely got the chance to step back as Lee unleashed a flickering barrage of kicks and punches. "Konoha Daisenpu!"

Tosen hopped over the low kick, blocked the middle kick, and countered the high kick with a horizontal slash. Lee flipped over the attack and brought his heel down, only for Tosen to spin off his body and retaliate with a flurry of slashes and stabs. Dodging each move by a paper's width, Lee caught the blade between his palms, redirected the momentum, and flung Tosen onto the street.

"Go Lee!" Nel cheered as Karin struggled to quiet her. "Kick his butt!"

Tosen blurred out using Shunpo. Karin couldn't see where he went, but Lee's eyes never appeared to lose sight of him.

"The detestable creature was right. You ninja are too dangerous to take lightly."

Tosen crouched on the eve of the nearest dividing wall and brought his hand in front of his face. His reiatsu skyrocketed as a smooth white mask encased his entire head. In a single leap, he closed the distance and landed a powerful kick directly against Lee's guard. The taijutsu master grunted from strain as his feet slipped, sending him flying through the wall and four more shops.

"Nel, run for Ichigo!" Karin pointed in the last direction she had sensed him. "Go!"

The little Arrancar stumbled and quickly scurried away.

"Do you think sacrificing yourself will buy her enough time to escape?" Tosen strode purposefully up to her. "You don't have a Zanpakuto either, do you?"

Karin pulled out her hidden knife and attempted to stab at his neck, but he caught the blade between his fingertips. Snapping it with physical strength alone, Karin could only watch in horror as his fingertip aimed for between her eyes and began to glow.

Typical, I finally meet a sweet guy who actually has sex appeal and I'm about to bite it… again. It really isn't fair.

A bottle crashed into the side of Tosen's mask, the contents dripping down the smooth surface. The traitor paused. Dropping his attack, both he and Karin turned in the direction of the bottles origin.

"Hey, jackass." Lee slurred and stumbled out of the hole his body created, taking another long swig from a similar bottle to before. "This time I'm getting the beautiful girl, hic."

Gaara struggled to hide the scowl caught on his lips. This wasn't the time to be emotional. It took a great deal of concentration to keep the remains of his sand cloud suspended in the air, and he needed the dispassionate mind of a Kazekage to keep it there while fighting. His emotions also had no place in a fight. He wouldn't go back to killing someone to satiate his personal desires. It didn't matter if Gin Ichimaru purposely baited him by catching Rangiku by the waist and carrying her off. It didn't matter if the smug bastard waved at him before taking off.

It didn't matter that she hadn't really fought back.

"You're still rather slow, Gaara-kun." Gin sat lazily on a stone beneath a tall persimmon tree. "I thought you'd have been better at Shunpo, bein' a captain an' all. Congrats by the way."

"What have you done with Matsumoto-san?"

Gin rubbed at the back of his neck with a chuckle.

"Matsumoto-san? Ya mean you two haven't gotten close enough for first names? You sure are slow, Gaara-kun." The perpetual smile on Gin's lips never faltered as he glanced through his slit eyes at Gaara's Zanpakuto. "Not like your sand. Scary stuff in that gourd o' yours."

"I dislike repeating myself, Ichimaru."

Gaara efficiently scanned his surroundings. There weren't any signs he'd brought her this far, or of any struggle prior to this spot. They were alone, which ruled out any ambushes. They were alone.

"She started fightin' me so I had to let her go. I barely escaped with my head on my shoulders."

"I see." Gaara reached for his dagger's hilt. "That's all the information I required."

"Oh, don't be like that. The two of us are having a nice friendly conversation here. Let's catch up a little." Gin folded his arms in his sleeves. "So, a captain, that's quite the jump seein' how you weren't even a seated officer when I left."

Gaara drew the dagger and Gin pointed an elbow at him.

"Ikorose, Shinso."

The blade shot out from his sleeve like a beam of white light. Gaara deflected it to the side and lunged forward. The wakizashi retracted and the blades clashed in a burst of sparks. Gin pushed him away and leapt up from the rock as loose sand dripped out of the gourd. Engaging again, Gaara struck then parried, dodged then pressured. Every blow was met with an equal response.

And Gin's smile never wavered.

Yamamoto coughed up a lungful of smoke and cracked open a blurry eye. How cruel of Aizen to strike down one of his own, a child no less. The poor creature could not even understand what was happening to it. It was a masterful tactic on the traitor's part, albeit uncharacteristically efficient, given Aizen's penchant for discussion. Its effectiveness ensured he would need to take an hour or so to recover sufficiently enough to fight.

A scream pierced through the ringing in his ears. Tilting his head to the side, he peered through one of the many gaps in his makeshift tomb of rubble. The young Arrancar with green hair scrambled around the corner, a double crescent axe striking the ground right behind her feet.

He had wanted to destroy her to ensure the safety of his beloved Seireitei. While he did it not for personal gain, was it an act of cruelty in its own right?

A tall lanky Arrancar lumbered around the corner like a titan cornering its prey. His face contorted into a furiously cruel sneer, he lifted the massive weapon and flung it at the fleeing child. It sailed over her head as she dove to the ground, and missed again when he pulled it back via chain and she vaulted over it.

"Stand still you little bitch."

Yamamoto shifted in annoyance. He had no use for those who instilled fear in others merely for their own amusement. Fear, like any weapon, was a tool. It could be used to dispel a conflict without any violence, or psychologically harm an enemy. It wasn't a toy to be used on a defenseless opponent. If the girl must die, it would be done decisively and painlessly out of necessity.

Not terrified and suffering at the hands of a butcher.

He prepared to move when a mighty reiatsu shook the sky. That spiritual pressure - so potent and endless without any negative emotion clouding it. He remembered when he first felt it. A lone

orange haired boy stood atop the altar, deflecting the executioner halberd Sokyoku without facing the flaming apparition, halting it while casually chatting with the captive Rukia Kuchiki.

It was a good young reiatsu, undeveloped in comparison to his, but a good energy regardless.

The youth landed next to Nel for only an instant, then rushed the taller Arrancar. Swinging the body length Khyber- shaped sword up diagonally, it sliced cleanly from hip to shoulder. He swung again, but the Arrancar leapt away into the air as confused rage marred his features.

"Coming your way, Naruto."

The blonde appeared out of his high speed technique holding a larger variation of the spinning orb Yamamoto had witnessed during their fight.

"Odama Rasengan!"

The ninja slammed the sphere into the sadist's back, sending the fool spiraling through the ground's surface.

So, this was the result of merely one week of training? The opponent they could not so much as scratch in the past was harmed by both men. Ichigo managed to accomplish the feat in Shikai no less. The growth impressed him, both impressed him. However, their combined attack still failed to eliminate the enemy.

He would need to step in.

"Naruto, I've got this." Ichigo readied his Zanpakuto and tilted his head back toward the rubble pile. "Dig out Yamamoto-san with Nel and head someplace safe."

"You achieve one shallow strike and assume victory." Yamamoto effortlessly backhanded the debris away from him and slowly sat up.

"Foolish boy, has such a trifling accomplishment filled you with the arrogance to forget your previous defeat?"

"I held back so Naruto could get a shot in." Ichigo's power rose higher and a faint blue glow materialized around him for a moment. "I know I am nowhere close to where I need to be, but I can defeat him." The visual portion of his power faded, but the pressure did not decrease. "Please, I need to do this."

Naruto scooped up Nel and ran over for him.

"Come on old man. Let's get you to someone who can patch you up. You're kind of… smoky."

"Focus on the battle at hand child. I will be fine."

"Sure you don't want a nap or something?"

"Do you treat all authority with such disrespect?"

Naruto shifted Nel so she could ride comfortably on his back.

"You remind me of another wrinkly jerk who didn't believe in any form of mercy either." Naruto glanced over his shoulder as Nnoitra pulled himself up out of the crater. "I can go with you someplace and help out or I can go wild on my own. Either way, we're leaving this to Ichigo."

Yamamoto sighed and studied the Substitute carefully. He was too great an asset for him to die here. Yet, without fighting in real battle, there would be no growth. It was a gamble on both accounts. His posture though, the steady nature of his reiatsu, radiated genuine confidence rather than his normal false bravado or ignorant assuredness.

"We shall head to the First Division barracks. It is time we see if you truly can lay claim to the special Zanpakuto residing there."

The Millennium Earl reached into the spatial rip he conjured and retrieved an object. Six inches wide at the hexagonal top, the shimmering glass pillar tapered down four feet into a sharp point. He stabbed it into the ground, earning a brief orange glow from beneath the glass surface. Dusting his hands off, he spun on his toes and skipped away from the city wall.

"It seems we have succeeded in our part, my Shadow." They entered a narrow alley as the cloaked figure followed. "Do you think we should lend our future ascendant a hand?"

The shadow remained silent.

"Straight to the point as always." The Earl chuckled humorlessly. "You are right though. If the boy has crossed over, she must have as well. We must search for her in the city."

The Earl exited at the other end and paused as a weaker Shinigami was decapitated right in front of him. The head rolled out of sight as the body collapsed and sprayed out life across tiled road. Further into the city, streets burned as buildings crumbled under the force of two armies clashing; dark red splatters of both Arrancar and Shinigami occasionally staining the pristine surfaces of Seireitei. Fire and blood, the bittersweet scents of battle, they hung in the air around him like fog, evoking vivid memories and all too raw feelings.

The bliss he felt when an enemy fell. The tears in his eyes as another loved one died in his arms.

It had been too long since he'd soaked in the twin scents. It had been too long he allowed himself to lie within the void, chained down by misery and using patience as an excuse not to act. It had taken too long to assemble the right pieces and resume his mission. No, there had been others before Sosuke Aizen, hundreds of possible pawns for him to sacrifice. He had merely refused to act.

Whether through apathy or patience, hesitance or wisdom, chance or fate, waiting for someone like Aizen made the quagmire of despair

worth it. Discovering the rogue Shinigami blessed him with a new plan, a better plan. Instead of sacrificial pawns, he had allied himself with an equal. There would be no sacrifices. There would be no loved ones dying in his arms this time. After thousands of years and defeats, his goals would be realized.

It will not be robbed from me again.

His shoulders slumped and he lightly rested one hand on the closest wall. The other hand came up and pressed against his chest as he tried to soothe the phantom ache emanating from the claw shaped scar hidden by his coat and suit.

"Forgive me, my Shadow. My senses are dancing, rejoicing as I return to the fight."

She appeared in a streak of midnight hair and sublime grace, her deadly strikes fluidly transitioning from one to another as she overpowered two enhanced Arrancar. They leapt back and each punched the air, releasing a short concentrated blast. Her left hand flew around the front of her body as a thin beam of energy whipped out of her palm.

"Shugohakke Sanjuni Shon."

Her beam threaded together like a tightly woven net, shielding her from the concussive attacks. They went to fire again, her other hand summoning another beam and whipping up, slicing the first Arrancar in two. The second dodged, but she leapt up and smashed her fist into its chest, the invisible energy within the technique causing a shockwave to expel from the Arrancar's back.

A scream echoed down the street and she sprinted after it, leaving the Earl and the cloaked figure alone on a desolate battlefield.

The Earl clasped his hands and brought them up to the side of his face with an exaggerated blush.

"Amazing." The Earl danced around the alley. "Did you see, my Shadow? Simply amazing."

The slumbering girl who once warranted a second glance from him made it through the void. At the time, only a suspicion tickled the back of his mind. The idea she may be special drove him to find her in the void after the light snatched her away. Seeing the boy, Naruto, in Hueco Mundo reignited his will to seek her out, because innately, he knew. Now, seeing her in motion, it confirmed everything.

"You saw it didn't you, my Shadow?" The Earl faced his companion. "That fierce power, the quality of that energy, please, tell me I wasn't seeing things."

Silence.

"Stunned by this discovery are you?"

The Earl cautiously stepped out from the shadows and peeked around at his still surroundings. He must follow her and see what else she could do. She never brought it to the surface, but he could feel it, that hidden nature buried underneath her normal reiatsu. He could sense the traces of her cursed energy. Instinctively, assuredly, he knew she was what he had been searching for - the last cog for his ultimate plan and the essential piece for the new world under the new god.

It would take time for her to learn. It would be difficult for her to understand. But perhaps, he could convince her of all that he knew. Perhaps, he could make her realize how important she was and that so much depended on her acceptance. Perhaps, there was hope.

Perhaps someday, he could gaze into a mirror and not hate the reflection who failed his family time and time again.

Ichigo shouted as he pushed against Nnoitra's double crescent scythe. Knocking the abnormally large weapon to the side, he used a

Shunpo to close the distance faster than the Arrancar could retrieve the weapon with its chain. He extended the technique with a second step, slashing cleanly across the Espada's unguarded midsection and landing behind his shocked enemy.

"Getsuga." Ichigo turned and sharpened the energy gathering at the tip of his Zanpakuto. "Tensho!"

A wide blue arc sunk into Nnoitra's back, screeching against the reinforced skin as tissue scorched under the condensed reiatsu. The Espada caught his weapon and spun out of the blast. Ichigo appeared above him and severed the closest arm at the elbow. Nnoitra's eyes widened as they looked at the new stump. Scowling, he leapt back and stuck his tongue out. Yellow spiritual power crackled at the end and a golden cero shot directly for the Substitute.

Ichigo swung directly into the attack, modifying his signature technique so it acted more as a slow moving shield rather than an attack. The air shook as the energies battled against each other, blowing away the loose debris littering the environment. Ichigo landed and Nnoitra fell into a crouch.

"You piece of shit!" Nnoitra jammed his weapon into the ground and propped himself up. "I'm going to frickin' kill you. I'm going to gut you, and Nelliel, and that fat bastard. I won't stop killing until I've proven once and for all I am the strongest!"

"I won't let that happen, Nnoitra. You're done hurting people."

The Arrancar lifted the large weapon overhead.

"Inore, Santa Teresa!"

Ichigo calmly watched the yellow aura wrap around Nnoitra as his transformation took hold. He knew this would happen if he pushed the Espada far enough and couldn't finish him quickly. Like a Shinigami's Bankai, an Arrancar's Resurreccion was their trump card and how they manifested their true power. He needed to keep cool

though so his reiatsu remained steady. There was no reason to be afraid or to try and convince himself he was more powerful than he felt. Through the nightmarish week of training, he had learned how high his power could climb, and it outclassed Nnoitra enough to beat him. It would still be a tough fight without the use of his mask or Bankai, but Naruto had told him not to use those powers unless absolutely necessary.

The aura dispersed, revealing a four armed Nnoitra grasping a more regular looking scythe in each hand. Horns rose up out of his head in a crescent shape as bloodlust poured off of him.

Okay, those extra blades are going to make this a lot harder.

The Espada lunged forward and began hacking furiously with all four blades in rapid succession. Ichigo quickly moved back from the wall of blades, dodging and deflecting as needed. He leapt over a low sweep and barely blocked in time as two more scythes came crashing down. The remaining two rushed from opposing sides for his exposed ribs.

Unable to break the lock and escape, Ichigo stepped up to the Arrancar, too close for the long weapons to do any damage. Nnoitra sneered and pulled his arms back, but the Substitute dropped Zangetsu behind him, catching all four scythes in another lock.

"Looks like you can't cut me at this range, Nnoitra." Ichigo grinned.

The Arrancar stuck out his tongue, the familiar crackle of a cero forming at the tip. Ichigo's breath caught his throat as the attack grew.

"Getsuga Tensho."

Energy flared to life and Ichigo swung up and over as hard as he could, breaking free from the trap and deflecting the blast with his own. He winced as smoke and dust blinded him. Leaping back to

see, white hot pain stabbed into his legs as a pair of scythes pierced each thigh.

The air cleared, exposing a new pair of arms clutching the weapons holding him in place. Nnoitra grinned sadistically as he lifted his four remaining arms high.

Yelling out in pain and determination, Ichigo sprang back, tearing his legs free as the unison attack came down. His blade stopped the first two. The second pair crashed down and overcame the block. The scythes hit at his shoulders and four deep gashes cut down Ichigo's entire torso.

He stumbled back with a grimace and collapsed onto his knees as the muscles completely frayed apart. Nnoitra laughed and tilted his head to the side.

"See that, Shinigami? You can't stop me from doing shit!"

Ichigo's teeth clenched as he forced his vision to focus through the pain. Did he go into Bankai and try to obliterate the Arrancar with a single blast? No. Naruto warned him there could be a risk to his power's stability by adding more power. He just barely had an idea of how to deal with his normal power. Getting more might do more harm than good. His hollow mask would probably be a similar problem.

Don't gain. Dig into what you already have, Naruto's words echoed in his mind.

What did he already have in his move pool that he could use without being able to walk? The Getsuga Tensho wouldn't be fast enough for Nnoitra not to block it. Besides, without solid footing, he'd probably just knock himself backward. No, he needed something quick and deadly… deadly, like what his inner-hollow used.

I can still move my right arm. I can make it work!

The Espada brought all six scythes out like an asura, his glee filled sneer boring down as a bloody Ichigo stared up with a defiant glare. Nnoitra charged.

Ichigo flung Zangetsu straight for Nnoitra's exposed chest. The Zanpakuto flew like an arrow as the cloth hilt lengthened, the end wrapping around his hand. The blade pierced the stunned Arrancar and sunk deeper until the point burst through his body.

"Deddori Datsu," Ichigo mumbled as his arm fell limply to the side.

Arms going loose, Nnoitra sagged as his face contorted into a rage filled glare. The Espada stumbled as the heavy tops of his scythes struck the ground.

"You little fu-" his voice trailed off into a final gasp and his eyes rolled back into his head.

He went limp as his breathing stopped and blood trickled off of Zangetsu and onto his feet. Prideful even in death, the Arrancar remained standing.

Ichigo felt the adrenaline leave his system and fatigue replace it.

Ow.

He wanted to shout out his victory, to confirm that Naruto's hellish training was working. He couldn't though. There could be other enemies nearby, and more importantly, he really wanted a nap.

Ichigo's eyelids closed and he collapsed to his side amid the rubble - a shadow appearing over him.

Author's Notes:

I was in good shape until another project got thrown in my lap. I need more of me.

On to the story. I had wanted to get into the battles more this chapter, but with so many fights and plot threads intersecting, I decided it would be better to flush the main events out in a single chapter rather than slowing the pace to catch everyone up each time I introduced a new conflict.

I'm sure some people will be surprised how quickly Aizen took out Yamamoto, and I really tried to show how it was more of a stun/delaying tactic than outright defeat. I will admit this Aizen is shaping up a little differently than canon. He's playing for bigger stakes and is less prone to taking risks, and he's doing that by scaling back his tendency to build drama for his own amusement. Hopefully, I've been building to that.

I'm really getting excited to finally start delving in the Earl one layer at a time, and hope you enjoy the direction I am taking with him and see how I have seeded certain points (like Hinata) in earlier chapters.

See you (probably) next week.

Ignite

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Naruto Rend

Chapter 10:

Rat, Snake, Horse, Dog, Naruto's hands quickly made each sign as he sucked in a deep breath.

Futon: Shinkuha!

Blowing out and spinning, a dozen wind blades sliced four pouncing Arrancar. Knowing the cuts were too shallow, Naruto pushed reiryoku through his system, vitalizing his limbs and allowing him to zip unseen between each enemy, burying a kunai in the back of their skulls.

Still not smooth enough.

Naruto landed and wiped the sweat off his face. The forces didn't seem to be dwindling and considering how many he'd seen the stronger Shinigami take out, chances were reinforcements kept arriving. Aizen was probably doing it in small waves, letting everyone get distracted in the thick of it before he snuck another group through the void. Who knew how many the smug grinning jerk had?

"That high-speed technique is different from the one you used in our disagreement." Yamamoto hovered behind Nel as the little girl kept hopping back and forth in a fighting stance every time a new Arrancar passed above them. "What do you call this one?"

"They are both Shunshin." Naruto ignored the protest in his muscles as he bent down to retrieve one of the kunai. "The first version wraps my energy around my body and then basically carries me in the

direction I want it to. The other one is the… true version - I guess you'd call it that. It uses my energy to make my body faster in brief bursts. The outer version is actually faster, but I can't really change direction or do anything until I stop. From what Ichigo said, they're both different from your guys' Shunpo."

"Yes. Shunpo uses our reiryoku to increase the speed and distance of each step. The greater the proficiency, the faster and further one can travel in fewer steps. A young student once related it to a springboard."

Naruto flicked the blood off the dagger and tucked it into the white belt of his Shihakusho. He'd gotten most of Danzo's jutsu functioning, but they were taking too much fuel and not doing enough damage. The problem was there wasn't any natural wind nature in his reiryoku to build off of. It was only plain energy. Sure, he could still use it to manipulate the air into the techniques. Without the affinity though, it took a lot of extra effort like if he'd tried to cast a fire jutsu when he was alive; and simply putting wind nature into a kunai was out entirely. He needed to use Danzo's wind sword jutsu where he wrapped kunai in actual air for that effect.

Of course, it made it impossible for him to use his Rasenshuriken or any of its derived techniques.

At least I won't make another black hole.

"Incoming!" Nel jumped up as a stray Bala destroyed the ground under her feet. "Ah ha, the great Nel Tu escapes death once again."

Naruto wiped the dust off his uniform with a frown and scanned the rooftops to make sure there wasn't anymore. The spillover from all the other fights continued to increase and was quickly becoming more dangerous than the fights he actually engaged in.

"We're barely making any progress." Naruto turned to Yamamoto. "Old man, you have anything we could use to clear a wide path?"

"Ryujin Jakka will take time to awaken after its sealing and Kido would not be an effective substitute in this situation. Any expansive techniques would merely draw more attention and delay us from our goal."

"I don't want to sound reckless, but it might be better to start taking these guys out or at least finding a way to shut down that hole in the sky."

"We do not yet understand why Aizen has launched this reckless assault and cannot be unguarded in how we proceed. Not only will uniting you with your Zanpakuto help you draw out your full power, but as the Commander's headquarters, the First Division will be the best place to direct our forces."

"I thought in our case, the Zanpakuto would add to my personal strength."

"Yes, your situation is unique. However, when Gaara first began as a Shinigami, his individual powers were stunted prior to partnering with his companion spirit." Yamamoto traced his long fingers along the dull edge of his slumbering blade. "A Shinigami is forever tied to his sword. The bond Gaara forged with his Zanpakuto allowed him to climb from obscurity to captain faster than almost any other in the history of Soul Society. Naruto Uzumaki, do not doubt the strength you will achieve when your Zanpakuto awakens."

The aged Shinigami moved past Naruto, the tattered remains of his charred uniform hanging loosely over a sinewy frame. He walked straightforward, each step purposeful and assured. Naruto couldn't help but chuckle to himself. The old man had been blown up and buried, his city was under attack, but he walked around like it was business as usual - that he had absolute faith in his forces.

That was one difference from Danzo at least.

"Hey Naruto, how do we find Hinata in all of this?" Nel hopped up beside him.

"We don't."

"But Naruto!" Nel grabbed his pant leg and looked up at him worriedly. "She went off to train alone again today. As the prince, aren't you supposed to go rescue her?"

Naruto felt himself smile as he patted her head and tried not to laugh.

"You haven't seen her fight yet. Trust me. Hinata is the one who would be doing any rescuing."

"But how are we going to get together?"

"Hinata has really good eyes. She'll find us no problem." He raised an eyebrow as she jutted out her lip. "What?"

"You're a crappy boyfriend. You have no sense of romance or chiv-chiva- whatever."

Naruto blinked in confusion as Nel threw up her hands and stomped after Yamamoto.

"Huh?"

Hinata smiled from her spot hidden in one of the trees surrounding a small garden. Naruto was always so cute when someone made him flustered. Deactivating her eyes, she dropped down and took off in his group's direction. Her doujutsu and its use had come along quickly over the past week, and while it hadn't been painful since Kurotsuchi-san's… tweaks, the sheer amount she could see nearly overwhelmed her the first few seconds she activated them. It was taking time to re-train her ability to process it all, as all had to with the Byakugan.

For surveying purposes, it worked wonderfully and truly surpassed the all seeing eye of her relatives. Unfortunately, the initial 'kick' as

Naruto put it, remained too distracting to risk in combat. It meant she had to repeatedly stop and find a safe place to activate her doujutsu. At least, she was getting better. Another week or two of training, and it would be as simple as looking left then right.

For now, she would have to use them to anticipate where the enemy might be, like the group attacking a lone Shinigami up ahead. She'd witnessed multiple occurrences of the same situation all over Seireitei. For all their power, or maybe because of their power, the Shinigami at large lacked any real concept of teamwork. They certainly operated as a unit in terms of where they needed to be and what role they were responsible for, but when it came to fighting, most of them handled battles as a series of one on one, or one on many, duels. Even when fighting back to back, the majority fought individualistically instead of using their attacks to assist each other or set up combinations. The Arrancar were capitalizing on that weakness by segmenting the population as much as possible. The stronger Shinigami could handle such tactics. The weaker ones were not so fortunate.

Hinata came to a stop feet shy of the wall dividing her from the battle up ahead. Facing her palms to the ground, she sucked in a breath and moved her reiryoku around her hands, slowly shaping them until they took the form of lion heads. Leaping up over the barrier, she dropped down behind the closest Arrancar. He spun with a slash and she twisted under the sword, using a lion fist enhanced uppercut on his chin. Spinning under a stab, she smashed the remaining energy into her surprise attacker's chest.

"Unare Haineko!" Gray ash spread out in a blinding mist. "Neko Rinbu."

The cloud churned around then away from Hinata and the gang of Arrancar shrieked as the streams of ashen blades ripped into them, shredding them to death. The area cleared as the ash reformed into a katana blade and the woman sheathed it. Brushing her long orange hair behind her slender shoulders, the woman let out a relieved sigh and smiled brightly at Hinata.

"Thanks for the help."

"Are you okay?" Hinata glanced at the scratches and bruises on the woman's arms and uniform.

"Yeah, they were coming at me too fast to release Haineko and still block. I got hit the few times I tried." Her eyes lit up. "Hey, you're one of Gaara's friends. I'm Rangiku."

"Nice to meet you." Hinata winced as another building exploded in the distance. "Rangiku-san, do you know the best way to reach the First Division during this attack? I am supposed to meet Naruto and Yamamoto-san there."

"The Commander is back on his feet already?"

"Yes, but he is recovering and not entering combat right now."

"Damn."

Rangiku bit her lip and glanced worriedly in a specific direction. If Hinata remembered correctly, it was where Gaara was fighting someone. She could almost sense the two flares of reiatsu clashing through the rest of the battlefield. Lee was getting ready to fight with a powerful opponent as well and he did not look stable.

Her chest tightened as a panicked flutter replaced a steady beat. She hated everyone being separated again. Nothing ever turned out well when that happened. It hadn't against Danzo. It certainly hadn't against Madara. Even if they didn't fight the same opponent, being near enough to assist or save each other was still preferable to being a battlefield apart.

We're not the strong ones anymore either.

She had taken out a dozen or so of these Arrancar, largely because they underestimated her and couldn't deal with her unfamiliar techniques. However, those she suspected were captains had taken

out that many, and the stronger ones had done so in single strikes. More impressively, the Arrancar identified the captains and were attacking with significantly more ferocious tactics. It was both awe-inspiring and worrying how large the gap was between them and the seasoned Shinigami.

Seasoned Shinigami, like Gaara-san.

"Gaara-san is strong, Rangiku-san."

Rangiku's hand subtly squeezed the hilt of her Zanpakuto.

"So is Gin and he specifically baited Gaara."

"Baited?"

"Gin dragged me away from the Garganta and made sure Gaara would follow him. I don't know why he did that, or why he let me escape so easily and made sure I wasn't anywhere near where he and Gaara would meet. It's not like him to make his fights personal."

"Why would it be personal?" Rangiku's silence spoke volumes to the ex-heiress. "Oh."

"They're both too stubborn for me to do anything about it right now." Rangiku's lips curved up in a cute, but forced, smile. "Let's get you to First Division."

"Okay."

"Can you use your reishi to create footholds in the air?"

Hinata blinked in surprise and slowly shook her head in the negative.

"I can walk on trees or water."

Rangiku waved for her to follow and they took off in a sprint.

"Gaara said the same thing and still doesn't do it very often. He prefers to stand on his sand."

"That's not that surprising."

"I originally thought having an unneeded platform was a security blanket for him like a teddy bear. Now though, I realized he never does anything without a reason."

Hinata nodded and increased her speed to push Rangiku. She never knew Gaara that well, but she believed the orange haired woman. It corresponded with everything Naruto had told her, and it also explained why the massive wall of sand still floated in the air. The others couldn't see, but with her eyes, she could tell he was actively using his reiryoku to keep it in the air and intentionally made it look inert and broken. There wasn't any chance he had merely forgotten to collect it.

The question was why was he wasting precious energy keeping it that way?

The paper between Uryu's fingers crumpled slightly as another miniscule quake rumbled overhead. He needed to ignore it and focus on studying. There was so much his grandfather hadn't taught him. Tools, techniques, theories, even mastering a fraction of what he'd read would propel him beyond his father and many of the Shinigami captains. This was where his attention needed to be. Not on the rumbling and certainly not on the war he felt raging on the surface.

Too bad his companions did not feel the same way.

"You two haven't completed your early afternoon training." He spoke without looking up. "Yamamoto was clear. You must adhere to his regimen perfectly if you want to get the results in the needed timeframe."

"But Uryu, Ichigo's reiatsu-"

"It doesn't matter, Sado."

The deeply tanned giant grumbled lowly as his unhidden eye hardened. Perspiration soaked hair caked to his forehead and face as veins popped out of his massive arms and the last vestiges of his armor faded away. A short young woman, barely coming up to the tall teen's waist, brushed the tips of her short black hair.

"Of course it matters." She placed her gleaming white katana in the crook of her elbow. "We should be up there fighting instead of hiding in the bunker beneath the Twelfth Division."

Uryu looked up and readjusted his glasses further up on his nose.

"Rukia, Sado, we need to prioritize our actions."

"Uryu, I know we lost badly in Hueco Mundo." The soft spoken man looked down at his empty fist. "That doesn't mean we are useless. We're still stronger than many of the Shinigami, and I promised I would always have Ichigo's back."

"Exactly." Rukia gave a sharp nod. "I am the third seated officer of my division. It is not right for me to be here while my comrades are suffering."

"Our defeats have nothing to do with this."

"Then why do you think we should stay?" Rukia's violet eyes leveled on the Quincy's in a stern glare. "Explain."

Uryu sighed and pushed himself to his feet. Walking away from the small desk in the corner, he came up in front of both of them. He could understand their desires. This was Rukia's home, and Ichigo was Sado's best friend. The tension from the war above felt like it was seeping down through the ground and hanging in the air around them. He understood how maddening it was. He personally wanted nothing more than to leave and make his way to Aizen.

That didn't excuse them from being short-sighted or ignoring glaring issues.

"There are too many inconsistencies to take this attack seriously if you think about it. We can't sense any Espada. Aizen's reiatsu hasn't moved away from the Garganta. His two followers, Gin and Tosen, actively sought out specific targets. While there is something unsettling putrid about the groups of Arrancar we do sense, the Shinigami forces aren't diminishing by any substantial margin."

"That's cold, Uryu."

"That's realistic, Sado. This is not Aizen's primary force nor are many of his powerful followers here. The Espada and Aizen himself are who we need to be concerned with, and unless we complete this training, the same miserable outcomes will happen again when we face them." Uryu swung his hand to the side. "If we really want to help, then we must become stronger for the real fight."

Their faces tightened as the expansive hall shook again. As frustrating as it was, they had a responsibility. Rukia's development was being sculpted from Yamamoto's instructions. It might only be through a written schedule and not directly, but the most powerful Shinigami in history had taken an interest in her speedy development. Kisuke Urahara, the peerless genius, had theorized how Sado might fully realize the power he'd merely scraped at up until now.

He was learning from the records of his greatest ancestors - from Yhwach's personal journal.

"Uryu is right. This training was expressly designed for a single month, right down to each hour of every day. We cannot betray their faith in us nor can we lack faith in them." Rukia went back to the center of the floor, her reiatsu flaring as cold once again seeped into the air. "I believe sparring is next on the agenda, correct Sado?"

Chad hesitated for a moment as his eyes drifted toward the stairs leading to the outside world.

"Alright." The hollow-like armor slowly encased his arms. "We'll keep training."

Lee swung his leg around, forcing Tosen to leap away from Karin. The traitor vanished in a blur and came up behind her. Lee grabbed her hand, spinning her into him to dodge the slash. Holding her tight, he leaned far back as the Zanpakuto swung over their heads. He twisted so he was holding her just above the ground as Tosen kicked where they had been. Scooping her up in his arms, he tossed her up and blocked Tosen's forearm with his foot.

"H- hey, why you, hic, why you not letting me dance with the hot girl?" Lee's droopy eye twitched. "You wanna dance with her? I'll kick your ass!"

Hopping up, he kicked with his bottom leg, sending Tosen sliding back as he flipped and caught Karin in midair. They landed and he spun her around in a flourish. Grinning drunkenly, he swayed back and forth as she struggled to find her footing.

"Yo- you're pr- pretty. I like, hic, you."

"Lee?" Karin stared at him in disbelief. "Are you okay?"

"I'm great." He clumsily waved his hand in a single swipe. "I really good."

"You're fighting barehanded against a sword wielding Captain and drunk."

"He never scratch- scratched meh. See?" Lee held up his arm, the severed fabric hanging loosely from his arm. Lee's face scrunched up in angry confusion. "That guy cut my shirt? Wh- why am I wearing

such loose clo- shirt? Where's my suit? Gai-sensei gave, hic, meh my suit."

"Lee, you're rambling."

Gripping the fabric over his shoulders he tore the top in two with one furious pull.

"Gai-sensei!"

"Lee-k-kun!" Karin blushed as his chiseled physique almost soaked in the sunlight. "What are you-"

"That bastard stole my suit." He curled his loose fists inward and stumbled forward as Tosen stood to his full height, bringing his sword out in front of him. "I'm gonna beat, hic, him up. Then, I wan- wanna - we'll dance more."

"Are you so arrogant you believe you can defeat me while intoxicated?" The traitor brought his blade up and held his hand against the ring hanging from the guard. "I will bring justice down upon your hubris. Bankai."

The ring swirled as trails of light streamed off it. It expanded around his body and split into smaller rings. Tosen waved his blade and the rings sailed past an approaching Lee. Black erupted from the rings and formed a dome around the entire area, stopping inches before Karin.

"Eh?" Lee's head bobbed around in total darkness. "Wah- what happen-ed to my voice? Bastard stole my voice."

"Suzumushi Tsukishiki: Enma Korogi." Tosen walked through the darkness. "You cannot hear me. All of your senses, but touch, have been robbed from you. Only one monster has ever escaped from this Mumyo, and you do not possess his inhuman durability or bloodlust."

Tosen lunged with a head-reaping slash, but Lee flipped backward and swung his arm out wildly. Grabbing the traitor's leg, Lee swung his heel down. Tosen blocked and Lee arched his spine back, driving an elbow into his exposed gut. Lee righted himself in the air and unleashed a whirling barrage of oddly angled punches and coiling kicks. Tosen parried the blows and used a Shunpo to vanish around to Lee's exposed side The traitor stabbed then quickly flowed into a series of diagonal slashes. The drunk-nin fluidly dodged each strike with a lazy expression.

Tosen ducked into a low sweep and thrust his Zanpakuto at Lee as he hopped over it. Coiling his arm around his opponent's, Lee whipped his free hand around in a powerful slap, catching Tosen square in the side of his face and cracking the smooth white mask.

"Hado Fifty-Four: Haien."

Purple energy flared to life around his captured hand and he grabbed Lee's triceps, causing the ninja to burst into flames. A sobering yell was nullified by the dome as Lee threw himself back onto the ground. Tosen stood wobbly as his mask slowly repaired itself.

"Hot!" Lee rolled to his feet and sent a diving punch straight into Tosen. "Why is everything so hot?"

Ribs gave out under burning fists, and with a final step, Tosen was sent flying through the barrier of his own technique, the dome slowly dispelled like frayed cord. Lee cried out in anger and his reiatsu surged to life, blasting away the flames and fading remains of Tosen's Bankai as it cleared the last traces of alcohol from his system. The power climbed higher, knocking Karin and loose rubble back.

The taijutsu-user relaxed and allowed his power to settle back down. Over the past week, it had gotten easier to access and repress his spiritual pressure. Oddly, it did not feel complete and continually failed to take on a visible aura. After a lifetime without access to

energy, he could honestly admit his impatience in that. He would not mope over it though. Its current form was still helpful for cases that required him to push at things his fists could not touch, and he healed far faster this way.

He studied the light burns on his skin as the traitor climbed to his shaky feet.

"What are you?" Tosen fell to a knee. "You fought within my Bankai like none of your senses were deprived."

Lee bowed low.

"I apologize. When you struck me earlier, I fell into a sake shop and accidentally ingested some of the vile liquid. I am truly sorry for any disgraceful behavior on my part." Lee came out of the bow with a sheepish grin. "Regretfully, I do not remember anything from that point until now. While I normally do not explain my abilities to my enemies, I believe in this case I owe it to you, to make up for anything I may have said or done during that time."

"What kind of ability could possibly exist that would nullify the effects of Bankai."

"In my world, there are techniques and skills that rob one of his senses. Gai-sensei believed one should train to fight in these conditions. If you cannot see, you listen. If they take your ears, you track them by smell. If they take away that as well, you feel the air moved by their bodies."

"You fight merely by feeling the vibrations in the air? That is insane and something I would not believe had I not witnessed it with my own senses." Tosen's power rose as his posture became more assured. "What is your name?"

"Rock Lee, Konoha's most splendid ninja." Lee brought an open hand up in front of him as he settled into his familiar starting position. "May I have your name as well?"

"Kaname Tosen." He held his blade upside down. "I do not wish for any more suffering to occur than there already has been. This fight is at an end, Rock Lee."

"No, Tosen-san. The real fight starts now."

Gaara wiped the blood off of his eye with the back of his sleeve as fresh liquid trickled out of the cut on his forehead. It probably went through his tattoo. He liked his tattoo.

Gin let out an impressed whistle.

"I din' think you had that kind a speed, Gaara-kun." He waved his Zanpakuto between his fingers. "Lucky."

Gaara cleared his vision again. He wasn't so foolish as to believe he could defeat Gin in a sword fight. The traitor outclassed him in that skill, a fact demonstrated by the numerous cuts and wounds decorating his body. He had to deal with it for a little longer though. All through their fight, drops of sand had sloppily fallen out of his gourd. With a few more, he would have enough to at least disable Gin.

Dealing with the traitor was secondary. He needed to keep his concentration on the sand in the sky. As exhausting as it was holding it there, once the Garganta closed and reinforcements stopped arriving, he would be able to wipe out the remaining forces in a single blow. Someone needed to realize that soon though. His reserves were dwindling rapidly which was slowing his already burdened reactions.

"You're lookin' a little tired, Gaara-kun. Kind of like the energy is leaking out of your body." Gin cracked his sky-blue eyes open. "I have been wonderin' why you haven't been usin' that sand a yours. I wonder. Does it have something to do with that big old cloud floatin' up in the sky?"

Gaara rushed forward with a Shunpo, flipping his dagger into a reverse grip and ducking into a forward spin. He slashed with a hook punch, rotated his hand, and immediately swung back. Gin dodged then blocked, locking them into a strength struggle. Gaara's teeth clenched as he struggled to keep the point of the traitor's Zanpakuto aimed away from him.

"Such big fancy moves." Gin edged the tip of the blade closer to Gaara's face. "That's a lot different from how ya used to stand around in one spot."

"Things change."

"They do. Of course, things also stay the same." Gin's grin became deeper and more serpent like. "I mean Rangiku-chan hasn't changed at all. That's got to burn a bit for you, right?"

Gin shifted his weight back so the point swiveled straight for Gaara's unguarded eye.

"Ikorose, Shinso."

Gaara jerked his head to the side as the extending blade sliced along his temple and head. Gin twisted hard, knocking the sand-user to the side as the blade retracted. Aiming again as Gaara stumbled, Shinso shot out catching an unprotected right shoulder and pinning Gaara to a tree.

The ex-Kazekage gasped out in pain as the grip on his own Zanpakuto became dangerously lax. Gin made a disapproving clicking sound and nonchalantly walked closer as his Zanpakuto shrank to allow the distance.

"You lost your focus for moment, Gaara-kun."

The red-haired Captain's head snapped up with a pained and defiant scowl.

"Hardly." He lifted up his uninjured arm. "Rendan: Suna Shigure."

Hundreds of small sand bullets shot up out of the ground, pelting Gin from all angles. His sword retracted entirely as the sand that did not fully pierce his skin quickly layered over it. Gaara dropped to his knees as his arm hung limply in the dirt. Closing his hand into a fist, the sand tightened around Gin as his bones began to creak.

"Bakudo One: Sai."

Gaara's arms snapped back behind him and crossed tightly as if they had been bound. His chest impacted forcefully into the ground as the invisible binding wrenched his shoulder painfully.

No, don't focus on escaping from the restraint Kido. If I immobilize him, the Kido will lose its potency.

"Bakudo Fifty-Nine: Tenran Toku."

A fierce twister started around Gin's feet and churned upward around him, blasting Gaara's element away. The ex-Jinchuriki's face paled as Gin walked out of his technique mostly unharmed. He could feel not enough sand pierced the skin for him to do any damage internally, and with the giant sand cloud, he couldn't concentrate enough to form inhalable particles.

"Scary." Gin let the word drawl out and flipped his Zanpakuto in his hand. "I may not survive if I let ya get up."

Gaara fought against the bindings as the traitor took aim.

This is not good.

"It's a shame I have to make Rangiku sad again." Cruelty spread out across Gin's face. "Bye, bye."

Aizen extended his hand and took the worn cloth strip one of his Arrancar offered him. He studied it for a moment before pocketing it and dismissing his monster. The timing was fortuitous and would be an excellent finishing touch to the day's events. Things were running smoothly. Nnoitra had been dealt with and the augmented Arrancar were creating an acceptable amount of havoc. They were weaker than he had hoped, but the fact no one had the opportunity to stumble upon the Earl's actions was enough for now.

Speaking of his rotund friend, it was surprising he had yet to return, instead, choosing to stalk one of the visitors from another world. He would need to be questioned when they returned to Hueco Mundo. Given the Earl's habit of disappearing, that could be immediate or days down the road.

The more pressing question pertained to his personal actions. Should he track down the two visitors Gin and Tosen had yet to go after? No, the one was with Genryusai-dono and the other fell under the Earl's interest.

How would Hinamori react if I sought her out? Would she be afraid? I bet with a few meaningless words I could convince her to forgive me. It may be an interesting way to pass the time.

A chuckle escaped his lips.

"I really must stop letting the Earl's carefree nature get the better of me. There is no purpose in toying with that girl any longer."

"Can you identify which one is resonating with you?" Yamamoto crossed the expansive hall of his office over to the three simple katana hanging on the far wall.

"That one with the crappy golden hilt." Naruto nodded at the one on the left. "It's got the same kind of feel he does."

Yamamoto picked it up in his gnarled fingers and brought it to the blonde. Wrapping his fingers around its tattered hilt, Naruto inspected it with a raised eyebrow, testing the weight in his hands. Using it as a weapon would be a waste of time. Outside of using one to sneak in a surprise cut or stab, he had no idea how to use a sword and would only get himself hurt trying to fight with it like the other Shinigami. However, the idea it could get him near, or back, to the level he fought Madara at would make carrying it around a worthwhile tradeoff.

Cause man, he was itching to start doing some real damage again.

"If this is truly your blade, then bring out its Shikai."

"Shikai… that's the form your Zanpakuto takes when you learn to harness some of its power, right?"

"Correct." Yamamoto held up his de-powered blade. "It is done by a command, followed the spirit's name. Only you can communicate with your Zanpakuto spirit, and only it can tell you the command."

How did he communicate enough to learn the command? The red-eyed bastard had been quiet since their first meeting. Did he say Kyo's name or go by anything that felt like instinct? Would Kyo contact him again now that he had the physical Zanpakuto? He really didn't have time to wait considering the current situation.

I'm going to have to guess.

"Okay Kyo, come on out." A lonely soft wind drifted into the hall. Naruto shook the blade lightly with a frown. "Let's go, Kyo!"

Yamamoto shook his head in disappointment while Nel shot him an unimpressed look. Naruto ground his teeth.

"Get out here, you lazy annoying bastard!"

Instantly, the world was sucked away and he stood back in the depressing landscape with the painted sky. An armored gloved hand grabbed him by the front of his shirt and picked him up off the ground. Naruto came eye to eye pair of burning red irises.

"What the hell did you call me you little punk?"

Naruto smacked his forehead against the taller man's.

"Why aren't you doing that Shikai thing?"

"I haven't given you the ability yet!"

"Why not?"

"Because you haven't earned it!"

Naruto twisted out of the grip and kicked the samurai away with his foot. They both stumbled back a few feet; the blonde immediately dropping back ready to fight. He was more than happy to thrash the jerk again.

"Haven't earned it? I dove headfirst into a fight with these Arrancar because you asked me to!"

"Big deal." Kyo snorted and folded his arms over his torso. "I took on an entire Kingdom in my day, and won, unlike you."

"I beat Madara."

"It's not winning if you get yourself killed."

"Why are you blocking my demonic energy?"

"Why are you so pathetic without it?"

Naruto's mouth opened to bite back a retort, but it died on his lips. He wanted to argue against that accusation. He didn't want to admit how underpowered he felt or how difficult it was not having against

the powerhouses surrounding him. He didn't like how much he missed having that ace for tough situations. He shouldn't. Sage Mode, as temperamental as it was being, should be enough.

It wasn't though and the frown on Kyo's face made it perfectly clear it would have to be. There really was no point to fighting.

"What do I have to do?" Naruto stood upright and clenched his fists. "For whatever reason, I'm stuck with you whether I like it or not and you're blocking access to the Kyubi's reiryoku whether I want you to or not. So what has to happen so that this Shikai thing works?"

Kyo's gaze flicked up at the endless expanse of painted sky and lightless ceiling.

"I'm not holding back the furball's power just to watch you squirm. You've got a lot of issues, some you couldn't accept even if I told you right now. I do know you probably feel like something's nagging in the back of your brain. Kind of like, you don't feel right or sense that you're missing something, but don't know what." Kyo sighed and held out his hand. "We need to take things one step at a time until we fix that. But, I suppose you've been a good servant up until now and could use a little assistance."

"I'm not your-"

"Now that we've finally met up and bonded our reiryoku together, you should be able to use your wind element and have it easier controlling Sage Mode."

"Just like that?" Naruto's face soured. "Kind of convenient."

"You saw the old man's sword. It is a fire spirit which grants a fire element to his reiatsu. I'm basically a wind spirit. You put two and two together."

"And the senjutsu?"

"Think of it like how the toads originally wanted to ride on your shoulders."

"You'll balance the nature energy so I can focus on fighting."

"Now you're getting it." Kyo's grin deepened as he tilted his chin up. "Not so bad being stuck with me now is it?"

Naruto rolled his eyes as the ghost of a smile tugged at his lips.

"How do I wake you up, Kyo?"

The room faded back to Yamamoto's office. His conversation must not have been long because Nel was still staring at him expectantly. The old man seemed to have an idea of what just happened, but remained patiently silent. Naruto blinked as a phrase struck him, like he had always known it. Sucking in a breath, he put on his best feral grin and held the sword out to his side.

"Show them those eyes, Onime no Kyo!"

The katana crumbled away, exposing an intricate gold hilted kunai. The blade shape was normal Konoha design, but it stretched a little longer than the standard version. Two thin spikes jutted out diagonally directly from the blade's base. He bit back a frown. It held a few too many similarities to the Yondaime's. The negative feeling quickly passed as energy traveled out from the kunai and swirled within him.

"An odd shape for a Zanpakuto." Yamamoto brushed loose some of the singed hairs marring his beard. "I assume to you, however, it is perfect. As it appears similar to those daggers of yours from earlier."

"Let's see." Naruto poured some of his reiatsu into the Zanpakuto and a sharp blue edge of wind energy extended beyond the metal blade. "Yeah, that should work."

He dispelled the technique and closed his eyes, drawing in the energy around him. They reopened, toad pupils surrounded by gold. His senses reached out and he smiled.

"You're late, Hinata."

She bounded over the balcony beside Rangiku and approached them.

"Maybe you were just impatient, Naruto-kun."

"Hinata-chan!" Nel ran up to Hinata and waved her arms around excitedly as big tears rolled down her cheeks. "I was so worried about you being out there all alone, and Naruto was lazy and wouldn't go rescue you and he's a lousy boyfriend and-"

"I'm sorry." Hinata knelt down in front of the little girl. "Thank you for worrying about me."

Nel sniffed, casting a fake glare out of the corner of her eye at Naruto.

"Someone had to."

"Really, Nel, really?"

"It's not my fault you don't know how to treat a lady." She smiled slyly. "I think the least you could do is treat Hinata to a romantic dinner when this is over."

Hinata covered her mouth with her fist and giggled softly. Rangiku folded her arms under her chest and nodded in agreement as Nel gave an exaggerated wink in Hinata's direction.

Clever kid.

"Let us return to the issue at hand." Yamamoto sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Young lady, select your Zanpakuto from the remaining two."

Naruto's lips dipped into a frown as his brain picked up more signatures all across the city. Gaara was hurt and Lee's opponent's power was skyrocketing. They were in trouble, but what should he do about the closer presence?

"Hold on a sec." Naruto faced the balcony again. "It's you right? You're the Millennium Earl "

He stepped out from around the corner, the sun glinting off his glasses and sharp teeth. Placing a hand at his midsection, he bowed low.

"Good Evening." The Earl tilted his head up, flashing a pair of demonic eyes. "It is good to see you my little friend."

Rangiku spun away and simultaneously drew her Zanpakuto as Hinata guided Nel behind her. Even the normally stoic Yamamoto's eyes widened beneath his bushy brows. Naruto fought the urge to swallow the lump in his throat. It wasn't that the man was powerful. He was, but not to a hopeless degree. Rather, it was how stark a contrast his energy was to nature's. The latter was life itself, and the Earl's was almost the complete opposite.

Man, its more twisted than Madara's.

"Please, continue. I am ever so curious to see who the dear lady has for a partner." The Earl pointed at Kyo in Naruto's hand. "After all, that samurai is an acquaintance from the past."

Naruto's hand tightened around his Zanpakuto. He'd file that along with the other hundred questions he had for Kyo. His friends were more important and in need of more immediate attention. What should he do? Fighting the Earl would take too much time. Hell, ignoring him, how did he decide who to help between Lee and Gaara? No, helping them would mean leaving Hinata alone with the walking nightmare.

The ex-heiress glanced over at him and his white knuckled grip.

"Naruto-kun, please go help the others." Hinata cautiously moved toward the katana on the wall. "I will hold him off until you return."

"… Alright." Naruto grabbed Nel by the back of her Kimono and tossed her straight at Yamamoto. The aged Shinigami caught her effortlessly and quirked an eyebrow at Naruto as the little girl sputtered a barrage of insults at the blonde. "I know you've got an issue with Arrancar, but just this once, please keep her safe."

"Very well." Yamamoto set her down beside him. "Silence, child."

Nel's mouth snapped shut and her posture went rigid. Naruto focused back on the remaining members of the room. The geezer's power was more than recovered enough to jump into the fray. The fact that he hadn't budged meant he was testing them - seeing what plan they would come up with.

Not to mention he probably has plenty of questions on how I know who the fat gray monster is.

"Lady, you're Gaara's friend right?"

Rangiku tilted her head over her shoulder while keeping a watch on the Earl.

"How do you know that?"

"Lee told me Gaara was friends with someone who looked like you. Do you know who Lee is?

"Was he the one who left with Gaara to find you in Rukongai?"

"Yeah. I need you to get him whatever Zanpakuto Hinata doesn't choose. He's in the business district fighting some kind of half hollow half Shinigami guy."

"What about Gaara?"

"He's in trouble. Between the two of us, I have the best chance of helping him." He wrapped his energy around him in a shell. "I'll be back as fast as I can, Hinata."

He zipped past the Earl and over the balcony. The ground far below rushed up to greet him, but he prepared another Shunshin and flew over to a nearby wall. Running along the surface, he felt Kyo pulling in more nature energy to replace what he already had burned through.

"Hang on, Gaara." He pushed reiryoku into his feet and launched himself over the next building. "I'm on my way!"

Author's Notes:

This chapter is a little shorter than I wanted, but it was better to break here than in the middle of the big moments coming down the line. I am trying to utilize Kido a bit more so that everything doesn't devolve into "explosive reiatsu" and "Zanpakuto special ability." The flip side to this is because of the lack of established spells I have a lot of playing room, which could be a good or bad thing depending on how you receive them (like Bakudo 59). I promise not to get too crazy with it.

I hope now that the story is picking up with each new chapter I'll get some viewership back up. While I am extremely grateful to everyone who continues to support this story with reviews (or simply reading), it was a little disheartening when I saw how 6,000 views for Chapter 1 dropped to 400 by Chapter 9 (with about 100-200 losses every new post). It's even worse when compared to the tens of thousands that Asunder has. However, I did know this story would be a tough sell. This is in part because of how long it has been since Asunder, and also, the Naruto community at large tends to be very resistant to outside material. Multiply that last issue with two established anime and a complex plot, and expecting it to immediately reach Asunder's numbers would have been naive. Honestly, it was that challenge

(and fact it would force my writing to improve) that made me decide to do it in the first place.

Again though, I must state how I am so grateful to everyone who has stuck with me. I hope that you continue to enjoy this story as it progresses and that it will be a rewarding piece of entertainment in the end.

On a final note, April is going to be an insane month for me. I have been been invited to teach self-defense classes to multiple schools and colleges. While it is great for the dojo, it does hack away at my two big writing days. It wouldn't be so bad if summer wasn't rearing its ugly head bringing with it all the extras it produces. So, while I will do my best to keep things flowing regularly, do not be surprised if a I miss a week here or there until things settle down near the end of September. As long as it does not reach the chaos of last year, there should not be any hiatus.

Thank you again, and see you next week.

Inferno

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 11:

"Hinata-san, this is exactly what you should not be doing." Allen's stern voice was overshadowed by the worry etched into his features. "You can't fight the Millennium Earl yet."

"I don't have a choice." Hinata stood behind the sliver chair she sat in the last time she visited her mindscape. "Naruto probably sensed in Sage Mode what I saw happening to Lee-san and Gaara-san. The other Shinigami are too distracted to help them in time."

"I understand that, but we are talking about the Earl. No one, not the Shinigami, not you, not even this Aizen, realize what he is capable of."

Hinata pushed down on the nervousness knotting up in her gut. Allen never struck her as the type to be afraid. However, his body language, from the way his eyes cast at the ground to the subtle tremor in his frame revealed someone who was absolutely terrified.

"Allen-san, what aren't you telling me?"

"There's an entire history about him that you need to know, and because I used almost all my power to reach out to you once, I haven't been able to explain everything. There is not enough time to do that."

"Then, tell me why he is letting me release you."

"He may suspect it is me or he may be interested in you for some reason. He's been known to have curiosity toward individuals for various reasons."

A shiver ran up her spine. Why would he have an interest in her?

"Tell me about his powers. What are his weaknesses?" He refused to look at her. "Allen-san?"

"I don't know."

"But you fought him before."

"The Earl was the head of a family called Noah. There were fourteen of them." Allen's face tightened as he finally stared directly at her. "All of their combined strength is in him now."

"How powerful does that make him?"

"Powerful enough it took sacrificing everything and everyone just to wound him for a hundred years." Allen turned away and gripped the back of his chair with a gloved hand. "Just… stay alive Hinata-san."

The room faded away and Hinata once again stood in the office. The uncomfortable atmosphere made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, but she kept her breathing even. Grabbing Lee's Zanpakuto, she handed it to Rangiku and motioned for her to go. She hesitated for a moment, sparing another glance at the Earl.

"Go, Rangiku-san. I will be fine."

The orange-haired woman disappeared with a Shunpo as Hinata brought Allen's sealed form to her side. There was no guaranteed the Earl wouldn't attack her as soon as she released her Zanpakuto. The more time she could spend the better, even more so if she could glean information from him.

"Why are you allowing me to gain my Zanpakuto?"

"I wish to see what it brings forth. You already have such a wonderfully unique energy aura about you. Seeing it in all of its true glory would be splendid. And besides, knowing the one is the samurai, I am so very curious about who your spirit ally is."

So, he does have a special interest in me. Why? Out of all of us, Naruto-kun is the most unique. Even the traces of my cursed energy are nothing in comparison to the Kyubi's. And what if he does suspect it is Allen?

"How so?"

"My dear that would be telling." A deep chuckle rumbled through his chest. "I promise I will answer all your questions in time. Now please, show me."

Hinata unsheathed the simple silver katana and crouched low in a fighting stance.

"Bring laughter to God and peace to the damned, dry all your tears and stride forward, Allen the Crown Clown!"

The katana and sheath shattered in a flash of light, hovering as if frozen in place. Gradually, the glowing fragments grew into thin wisps of thread and gently traveled around her arms and over her shoulders. Stitching together over her closed eyes, they solidified into a silver mask as a plush coat of pure white draped down to the back of her calves and billowed out around the sides as her midnight hair cascaded back over it. Hardening over her arms in a solid black lacquer, skin like armor spread down over each hand before tapering off into razor sharp points at the fingertips.

"Wow," Nel gasped in awe.

Hinata wiggled her fingers and clenched and unclenched a fist. It seemed she still had all the mobility necessary for her taijutsu, but now had the means to block weapons freely and pierce her enemies.

Was it always intended to be this way? Or did the Zanpakuto take shape as her and Allen-san's energies synchronized?

"Now, there's a face I haven't seen in a while." The Earl remained exuberant on the surface even as a new dangerous undertone set her on edge. She felt a chill in her bones like an unsettling shift had occurred. "Is that you in there Allen Walker? Did you escape death once again?"

The Earl walked closer as his hand reached out and summoned a small portal. Rage radiated from his crazed pupils as he reached in and tore out a massive broadsword. Hinata brought her hands up in a guard as every instinct told her to run.

"Exorcists. Innocence. The Heart." The Earl spoke each word with a mocking hiss as his gaze looked right through her. "Allen Walker."

He burst forward in an incredible display of speed, chopping down with a double handed slash and sending both him and a blocking Hinata crashing through the opposing wall and out into the sky.

"Allen Walker!"

"Hinata-chan!" Nel lunged for the hole in the wall, but Yamamoto snatched her arm and held her firmly in place. "Let me go!"

"You would merely distract her-"

"No, you don't understand. It's him. He's the difference!" She struggled against him for frantically. "I have to warn her."

"Calm yourself, child. Explain."

"These Arrancar's cero taste bad."

"Cero have taste?"

"No, normally they're just hot." She faced him as her eyes welled up. "I didn't realize it until that creepy dude attacked, but he's got the same nasty energy and a lot more of it"

Yamamoto's face fell a nearly indistinguishable amount. When Uzumaki had called that creature by its name, he had hoped beyond anything the newcomer was being deceived by a copycat. The twisted energy leaking off of it could have been possibly explained as a simple perversion of reiatsu. However, no other being, mortal or otherwise, possessed the ability to transform another with their energy. Certainly, a Shinigami could transfer their powers and a person's reiryoku could be used to replenish or reinvigorate another's. To transform the energy of a cero would require a corrupting element at the user's core.

"Stay here."

"But-"

He loosened his control on his reiatsu, forcing her knees to give out so she collapsed onto the ground. Tearing off a freshly scabbed wound from his shoulder, he dipped his fingers into the fresh blood and drew jagged lines up each arm.

"Black and white net. Twenty-two bridges, sixty-six crowns and belts. Footprints, distant thunder, sharp peak, engulfing land, hidden in the night, sea of clouds, blue line. Form a circle and fly through the heavens." Yamamoto thrust his hands against the glowing rectangle he summoned. "Bakudo Seventy-Seven: Tenteikura."

Roots of blue light travelled out from the box as the markings on his arms disappeared.

"Attention all Shinigami, this is Yamamoto-Sotaicho." He called through the mental link provided by the technique. "The Ninth and Eleventh Divisions are to continue dispatching the Arrancar on the outskirts. Second Division Captain Soifon, order the Onmitsukido to assist them in locating stray targets. All other divisions are to

converge on the nearest barracks to your present position, excluding the headquarters of the previously aforementioned two. Shinigami ranked tenth seat and under, begin gathering the wounded. Ninth through third seats are to guard them and defend the barracks."

His eyes cut over to the now empty wall. Those artificial blades had hung on its surface since the walls were erected. For all four to be claimed, and for that warning to come true now, it was beyond coincidence. If dark matter was once again at play… yes, they could not focus on merely repelling the invaders.

"All captains and lieutenants, this is no longer a defensive battle. I order you to eliminate every Arrancar with your full might. Do not let a single wretched entity escape. However, you are not to engage Aizen or his companions, the traitors Kaname Tosen and Gin Ichimaru, or the gray creature wearing a tall hat known as the Millennium Earl. You are to avoid them under any and all circumstances. Gaara no Suna, Rock Lee, Naruto and Hinata Uzumaki, and Ichigo Kurosaki shall deal with them."

He dispelled the technique and reigned in his spiritual pressure. Despite being a child and lacking any significant power to call her own, she was disconcertingly resistant to his. Seated officers had buckled under the same intensity he just used. She may have been trembling, but was quickly regaining her ability to stand. The fact she was a complete Arrancar, and not one of the pseudo-beasts that simply tore off their own masks, meant Aizen had utilized the Hogyoku on her at one point. Why would he simply discard her? Was her child form and lack of destructive capability no interest to him? She appeared and acted as a normal child. Did she not have any interest in fighting?

Or is it another facet of his treachery?"

"Collect yourself." The cane reformed around Yamamoto's Zanpakuto as he walked behind his desk. Jabbing the point into the center of a random tile, a clicking mechanism echoed through the

hall and the wall behind him opened. "We are heading to the Twelfth Division."

"I thought you said we needed to be here?"

"I have laid out all the instructions they need and passed on the artificial Zanpakuto to their owners. You are a more pressing concern."

Nel tilted her head to the side and blinked in confusion.

"How so?"

"I will explain on the way."

"No way." Nel folded her arms and twisted her head away. "I ain't going anywhere; let alone in a dark place with you, dirty old man."

"I am attempting to discern the truth about you, child. I am extending you a kindness by giving you a chance to prove your innocence. You are rapidly deteriorating my patience."

"Okay, then!" Nel's voice came out more as a panicked yelp than a confirmation as she raced past him and into the dark corridor.

The aged Shinigami sighed and entered as well. He would need to stop briefly at the Sixth Division to retrieve the writings left to him when the Gotei 13 joined Seireitei. The science division would need some time to discover the truth of the little Arrancar, which would provide him with the opportunity to review the journal from so long ago.

Ichigo groaned as he stirred back into consciousness. He shot up, water splashing out of the steaming pond and out onto the barren rock of the training cavern. Why was he here? Wasn't he fighting Nnoitra?"

"What?" His alert eyes scanned around, spotting the back of Naruto's head as he looked toward the entrance. "Naruto?"

"I'm just a Bunshin." The cloned glanced over its shoulder. "Boss was right. Those fake hot-springs do work wonders. Maybe if he used them more, he and Hinata would be able to do talk more than three minutes before passing out when they got home."

"So he decided to keep tabs on me." Ichigo crawled out as water poured off his soaked uniform. "I wish I hadn't needed it, but I'll still have to tell him thanks."

"I got to admit. The six arms and scythes thing was kind of ridiculous. You handled it relatively well, especially since you beat him only using Shikai." The clone turned around fully. It moved with an unusual stiffness like the very muscle in its body was tense. "How are you feeling?"

Ichigo did a quick squat and some hops then squeezed more liquid from the sleeves of his Shihakusho. He must have been pretty messed up for Naruto to dunk his entire body. Honestly, the fact he hadn't needed Orihime or a healer like her to put his legs back together surprised him. His inner-hollow or Zangetsu must have been looking out for him again.

Zangetsu!

His head whipped around. Where the hell was his Zanpakuto?

"Naruto, where did you put Zangetsu? Did you get him when you recovered me?"

"Of course." Bunshin jabbed his thumb at the pond. "I wasn't sure if soaking it would help you recover faster, spirit being connected to you and all, so I dropped it in the springs."

"And you couldn't tell me that before I started drying off?"

Ichigo muttered a string of curses as he sloshed back into the water and plunged his face into the water. Had Naruto just flung his partner in there? How careless could the guy be? No, not careless, Naruto's training had been way too precise for him to be unaware of his actions. Spotting his sword, he waded over and picked it up.

Weird, I don't remember the bottom of the blade curving down near my hand this much.

It felt the same in his hand. If anything, it felt even more natural, kind of like how it always did each time Zangetsu taught him something new. Was his Zanpakuto happy he defeated Nnoitra with just Shikai? A toothy smile stretched across his face. He'd done it! Even in the face of the fifth Espada's Resurreccion, he hadn't resorted to Bankai. It was a sloppy and desperate win, but he'd done it. He was growing and through his own understanding of his power rather than the sudden power ups revealed to him. While he had thrown his all into the training, this gave him proof it was working.

Something poked on the back of his head. He quickly righted himself out of the water and sucked in a lungful of air. Bunshin stood on the water's surface tapping his foot.

"Wanted to make sure you hadn't passed out and were drowning."

"Sorry, I thought Zangetsu looked a little different and got lost in thought."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I feel good." His lips tilted up and offered a small grin. "Actually, I feel a lot more confident. I know that it was still too close, and I still need to go farther, but it's encouraging to see how much I've improved."

"Boss told you the trick was learning how to bring out your peak energy at will. Do you think you could do the same in Bankai?"

Ichigo eyes widened in surprise. Bankai? They hadn't even really discussed it outside of him explaining to Naruto what it was. The question and the clone's rigid body language made him more nervous than curious.

"We haven't tried that yet."

"That's why I'm asking. What do your instincts tell you?" Worry fought back and forth behind the clone's eyes. "You need to be one hundred percent certain regardless of what you say."

Ichigo felt his stomach tighten. Had things gotten that bad while he was out?

"What's wrong?"

"Boss has been keeping me updated by making a clone and having it immediately dispel. Things are getting… complicated."

"Complicated?"

"The Shinigami have their hands full with the Arrancar. Lee's fighting with one of the traitor captains, and Gaara is dealing with the other one, but he's in trouble. Boss is heading for him right now." The clone's jaw tightened. "Boss has thirty extra clones running around doing damage control where they can and also trying to discover if the Earl was up to anything from when he left Aizen and appeared before us. Because of Gaara, Hinata is fighting him on her own right now."

"Complicated is a good word for it." Ichigo leapt out of the water. The Arrancar were dangerous in numbers, but nothing the captains and lieutenants couldn't handle, if they were cautious. It was the big four they needed to worry about. He already owed Naruto a lot. Making sure his friends stayed alive would be good way to start repaying him. "Since you've gotten everything planned out, who do you want me to go help?"

"No one."

Ichigo's brow furrowed as his lips dipped into a frown.

"I said I was okay to figh-"

"Aizen's starting to look like he may jump into the fray or cause more problems. You need to keep him occupied, and considering he keeps someone like Nnoitra in line, you're going to need that ten times power boost from Bankai."

"Five to ten times."

"I'd settle for either." Bunshin returned to solid land. "Can you do it?"

Could he handle Aizen? The only time they met face to face, the traitor blocked his Tensa Zangetsu, his Bankai, with a single finger. It wasn't a catch or a redirect. No, skin to razor edge, he stopped it dead in the peak of its swing.

I'm stronger now.

Could he beat him? Doubtful. His strength hadn't grown that much in the past few months since then. He should be able to buy Naruto some time - if his reiatsu stayed stable. Would it actually be that way was the big question?

"Only one way to find out." Ichigo lifted his Zanpakuto out in front of him. "Bankai!"

His energy surged up around him, hiding him from view for an instant before dispersing in a powerful gust of dissipating reiryoku. The trench coat like Shihakusho fanned out as he swung the daito out to the side, the chain clinking as it settled off the edge of its hilt. Good, his reiatsu still felt stable and his nerves hadn't gotten the better of him at the thought of facing down Aizen. He felt calm. Well, calm enough to keep in control.

"It's far above when I saw you use it against Nnoitra. You want to go for it?"

"Yeah."

"There are more forces slipping in all the time and Gaara's sand is still hovering in a cloud. My guess is he's waiting for someone to close the Garganta and then he's going to use it to ruin someone's day. Keep Aizen distracted so I can make that happen. Hit him hard and don't let up."

Ichigo nodded and disappeared without so much as a blur.

The blade shot out, piercing Gaara between the eyes and out the back of his skull. His mouth opened in a silent gasp as blood slid down on both sides of his nose, dripping off his chin. His frame went still as the skin cracked and turned to sand. The rest of the body followed suit until only a sand pile remained.

Gin's face scrunched up quizzically as his Zanpakuto retracted to its normal size. Gaara dove and slashed for the base of his skull. Gin twisted at the last second, the dagger slicing a deep gash along the side his neck. Gaara rolled so his back rested against the same tree that he had been pinned to. His chest heaved as the sweat slick grip on his Zanpakuto trembled.

Gin clutched at his wound, his eyes wild with anger and shock.

Gaara struggled to find his footing on rubbery legs. Using the sand clone in conjunction with the Kawarimi had been a last resort. It consumed the last of his useable energy. His control over the huge sand cloud would soon start slipping regardless if he moved or not. Why had no one managed to close down the Garganta? Naruto or the others with a ninja background should have realized what he was attempting. They should have known the cloud wouldn't stay in the air without his constant influence.

Were they okay?

The Earl had disappeared soon after the battle began. What if he pursued them? None of them possessed their Zanpakuto, or even the full might of their original abilities. While not defenseless, they were unlikely to survive against a man likely at the level they described Madara. Would he kill them? After so many years being the sole Shinigami from another world, would his friends be taken so quickly?

Gin aimed his Zanpakuto again and Gaara made a claw with his injured arm resting on the dirt. The traitor cried out in pain, quickly tearing away his white overcoat. A fist sized lump churned under the stretched paling skin of his arm.

"A clump of sand traveling within your flesh must be extremely painful, Ichimaru." Gin scowled and tried to aim again, but Gaara forced the sand to shift down to the center of the joint. "I may not be able to kill you outright, but I can prevent you from using your sword arm long enough for you to bleed to death."

Gaara flicked his wrist, wrenching Gin's arm. Being an ex-Jinchuriki still equipped with a tailed beast's power made him nearly peerless in terms of endurance. Coupled with the benefit that Gin's injury was bleeding far worse than his shoulder and Gaara knew he would outlast him. Unless he possessed inhuman tolerance, the traitor would need to flee or he would simply struggle until life left him.

Gin grasped his pain racked arm and slowly began to pull it up as the sand rubbed the joint bare. Gaara curled his fingers tighter, moving the sediment down to the hand and filling each digit. Gin's body shook from strain as his bangs clung to his damp forehead. Bright red stained the upper right portion of his torso and trailed down the arm. Still, the blade inched closer to the front of his chest.

Gaara grit his teeth as he fought against Gin; repeatedly forcing his sand to scrape and tear at tissue and nerves. His vision blurred from both perspiration and fatigue. He had to defeat him. Not because of

personal conflicts or Rangiku, but because he needed to if he wanted to survive. His friends needed him now. His subordinates and fellow Shinigami needed him and his sand. Failure equaled death.

Gin cradled the hand and sword in front of his chest, aiming the shining point at Gaara's throat.

This is not good.

"I don't think you'll be doing that neat trick of yours again, Gaara-kun." Gin's lips trembled in a smile as his good hand clenched tighter. "Where did you learn that anyway?"

The Zanpakuto extended in a deadly flash.

"He learned it from me!"

Slamming his kunai and feet down on Shinso, Naruto drove the attack into the ground, his left fist high in the air as it clutched three shuriken. Whipping them straight for Gin, Naruto reached into his vest and pulled out a much larger blade. Gin retracted his Zanpakuto as he dodged with a stumble and Naruto flung the new weapon.

"Futon: Fuma Shuriken."

Three more blades rotated out of the one as blue wind energy coursed off each edge. Gin could only look up defeated as the giant windmill shuriken raced for his head. A cloaked figure appeared in front of him, the projectile shredding through its torso with ease. It shoved its hand down and caught the blade's binding ring. Yanking it free, the figure threw it back at Gaara. Naruto grabbed the redhead and pulled him away as the shuriken sliced into the tree. The leaves shuddered, and with a series of loud snaps, the entire tree crashed down.

Naruto shot to his feet as a Rasengan spun to life in his palm.

They were alone.

"Did they get away?" Gaara tried and failed to sit upright.

"Let me go into Sage Mode." The blonde went still for a moment. "No, they're getting away from here as fast as they can."

"That may be for the best."

"Yeah." Naruto faced him and crouched down as concern washed over his face. "You don't look so good. Don't worry. I'll get you to the medical guys, just point the way."

"No. I can't risk getting any farther away."

"Look, I know about the sand cloud. The Shinigami are cleaning house so you don't need to-"

"You don't understand, Naruto. Garganta are temporary gates. Something within it is keeping the corridor open."

"They're sending through reinforcements in small groups. They can't do it stealthily if the sky keeps getting ripped open."

"If they were trying to be discreet, they wouldn't open it in such a visible spot. It is definitely a distraction, Naruto. Plus, they likely need it there either to retreat or send something large through. Which ever it is, my sand needs to be there as a shield or a trap until-"

"Until I get it closed." Naruto chuckled and helped Gaara sit up. "See even when we're not getting along we can read one another's strategies."

"Yes. Although, it is unfortunate it takes such extreme circumstances for us to actually speak to one another."

"Yeah, it's pretty sad. Isn't it?" Naruto helped the captain to his feet and supported him. "I promise to sit down with you when this is done."

"Agreed." Gaara motioned with his head toward the fallen branches. "Hide me in there so I can still see my cloud. Then go, that monster, the Earl, is lurking somewhere."

"Hinata is keeping him busy."

"That's risky." Gaara winced as Naruto guided him down and placed the leaves over him. "For any one of us alone it would be the same, but you know that."

"I'm really trying not to focus on it. Otherwise, I'm going to start rushing and do something stupid. You're safe. Now, I need to go deal with that hole in the sky."

"Do you have any idea how to close it?"

"One step at a time, Gaara." Naruto climbed to his feet and quickly went through five hand seals. "Now, time to see just how far I can travel with the replacement technique!"

Lee rapidly dodged the massive clawed hands in a series of back handsprings. Jumping straight up into a spin as one of the fur covered insect arms swiped at him.

"Konoha Goriki Senpu!"

Lee's kick only served to propel him away from the attack. He flipped and landed in a crouch, sliding across the rooftops in a destructive skid. A sharp cramp ran up his calf as his joints pulsed with a continual ache. That kick had crushed boulders in the past. The strength of Tosen's transformation was unparalleled.

He had been lucky this new state seemed awkward, unrefined.

The hunching beast turned to face him. The chains hanging from his horns clinking as the double gossamer wings quickly fluttered and stopped every few seconds. Towering so high above his

surroundings, the tips of Tosen's four hands barely grazed the tops of the dividing walls as the bushy tail swiped away chunks of rubble. Sunken emerald pupils shifted within a pair of bulbous eyes as his human mouth curved up into a wicked sneer.

"I see you, Rock Lee!"

"You couldn't before?"

"I have been blind my entire life." The voice reverberated against itself like a hollows. "Seeing the sky and this city, it is amazing."

"I wish you could see the beauty of things unblemished by this violence." Lee stood to his full height and stomped his aching foot down. "It must have taken a great deal of hardship to attain the skills you demonstrated earlier."

"Only those earlier skills?"

"This unnatural form is not something that could have been attained through hard work. It is not even a talent or a new power to increase your existing abilities. It is a crutch that replaces everything else." Lee brought his fists up as he sunk into another fighting stance. "I had suspected you were unpracticed with this transformation. Your movements lack the grace and mastery they did originally. You have now confirmed it."

"Crutch or not, you cannot surpass this power."

"I will not lose to someone who does not earn their strength. It doesn't matter if it is an Uchiha who abandons friends and steals other's techniques. It doesn't matter if it is a pair of traitors imbued with a cursed seal. It doesn't matter if you can turn into a giant demon cricket. It may be foolish, but my body will crumble away before I let those who do not master what is theirs defeat me."

Tosen burst out in a mocking laughter.

"Such arrogance from such a lowly creature!"

Tosen thrust an arm straight for him. Lee vaulted over the hand and raced up the arm. He needed to get to the face if he wanted to do any damage. The body was too big and durable for his techniques to be effective without the inner gates.

Tosen swung up, shaking Lee loose and high into the air. The hollowfied traitor's eyes glowed lime-green as his reiatsu raised to a near suffocating degree. The taijutsu master could only watch as the twin spots grew and then condensed into a single spot.

"La Mirada."

The gigantic cero exploded into a deadly beam as Lee hung helplessly in the air. A chain of pure reiryoku wrapped around his ankle and pulled him under the technique as it scorched past, the crackling trail stinging his skin. He landed as the chain disappeared and Karin ran up to him.

"Karin-san, I thought you escap-"

She hopped into his chest bridal style and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Don't talk, run like hell!"

Drawing circles in the air, the trailing energy coalesced into four circles.

"Los Neuve Aspectos!"

Lee sprinted along the tops of the walls as screeching concussive waves showered down, nipping at his heels. He pushed faster as each sound blast neared. Tosen waved his insect arms around like a composer, forming and directing the circles as Lee bounced and raced from crumbling wall to rooftop and to another dividing wall.

Every place he touched shattered under the vibrations an instant after he escaped.

"He's charging that mega cero again." Karin's eyes widened in horror as the lime-green tint reflected off her glasses. "Lee, it's bigger than last time."

"How much so?"

"Double."

"Okay. Forgive me, Karin-san."

He planted his feet and tossed her as far as he could away from the path of the blast. The beam flashed as he leapt to the opposite side. The energy surged past literal inches from him. The shockwave quickly followed, catching him in its wake and throwing him violently through the dilapidated remnants surrounding him.

Lee crashed through another store and rolled to his feet as he coughed up dust and smoke. His ears rung and eyes watered as he tried to reorient himself. The fog of destruction swirled and parted as Tosen's backhand swept down, knocking Lee through the entire solid length of a dividing wall.

Was this all my words meant?

He tumbled out the other side onto his back. There had to be a way for him to surpass this adversary. All the efforts of Gai-sensei could not be shamed by being defeated by someone who thoughtlessly claimed power without effort.

There is more in this body of mine.

He could not stand losing to another person doing evil while spouting justice and flaunting borrowed power. Geniuses like Neji honed their natural prowess. People like Naruto and Ichigo were gifted with exceptional power, but trained relentlessly to make it theirs. They

weren't like the Uchiha who could amass power just by seeing it and then rely purely on that without any attempt to perfect the basics of it. Those that put in the effort of mastery shouldn't lose to those who did not. Those who boasted about their righteousness at the expense of other people shouldn't win.

Is that naïve of me? Yes, yes, it is. But then again, my naivety is what has taken me so far.

Tosen walked over and hovered above him.

"I commend your resolve, Rock Lee. However, resolve in the face of absolute power is merely empty words. While I may have claimed this form through a means you look down upon, all sins are absolved if they are committed to further a great cause. Even killing you, an outsider I have no ill will against, is still acceptable under that cause. Cutting down obstacles is justice."

"Rock Lee!" Rangiku dropped out of Shunpo and slid a red wrapped katana across the ground toward the prone ninja. "That is your Zanpakuto. I'll hold him off while you release it."

"Another Shinigami boasting above her worth."

"Unare Haineko!"

Her blade dissolved into gray ash and billowed out like a twister for Tosen's face.

Lee grabbed the katana and the world immediately shifted away from the battlefield. An entire forest sprouted up around him, stretching into a bright sky as cool grass grew beneath him and cushioned his body. Leaves expanded out so that they encircled above him.

"You've got an honest mind, boy." A voice chuckled lightly, in sharp contrast to the gravelly tone it carried. "I like that in a companion."

Lee tilted his chin down. He was on the edge of a small clearing. In its middle was a clear small pond being fed by a waterfall. It emanated from a large boulder settled in the center of everything. It was tall enough that even standing, Lee would have needed to look up to see the man on it. Sitting hunched at the top was a lanky man with sinewy forearms. Faint scars led up to a billowing white captain's haori trimmed in red and orange. Wrinkles framed his hawkish gold eyes peering out from the nest of smooth red hair that hid most of his face and head. His calloused feet were bare and soaked in the feeding point of the waterfall.

A small orange hawk flapped down out of the trees and perched on the halberd resting across the man's lap.

"Am I dead… again?" Lee sat up and rubbed his forehead as the man laughed so loud the leaves shook. "No, I wasn't injured enough for that."

"This is your inner world, Lee. This is the space our spirits share."

Lee shot to his feet as excitement sprang to life over his face.

"You are my Zanpakuto?" Lee shook his fists in glee. "Yosh!"

"Yosh indeed! Yes, I am your new companion. My name is Shigeru Sokyoku Yamamoto." He reached out and scratched the head of the bird. "And this is the spirit who once resided in my Zanpakuto, Kikoo."

Lee's eyes almost bulged out of his head.

"I have two spirits?"

"Hm, indirectly, I suppose you do." Shigeru scratched at his long beard as he looked up in consideration. "A Shinigami's power is always tied to his Zanpakuto until death and I'm not really dead. Bah, I wouldn't think about it too much. You are in the middle of a fight, after all."

"Is he not ignoring me?"

"Time moves faster in your inner world. We don't have enough time to really talk and answer your many questions, but we can bond without worry of your soul being destroyed."

"I see." Lee looked down and stared at his feet. "Yamamoto-san."

"Shigeru."

"Shigeru-san, I arrogantly spoke of not using new powers without training them. I know it is foolish, but I am apprehensive to use your strength to defeat this opponent. Although, I am ashamed to say I cannot defeat him without it."

"You couldn't beat him with the Eight Gates?"

Lee's head snapped up as his mouth opened slightly. His spirit knew about the gates? No, more importantly, he could use the gates? From what he understood, there was not anything similar to a chakra system in a soul's body. The energy was mostly freeform. The lack of tenketsu should make it impossible.

"You look dumbstruck, Lee." White teeth appeared within the mass of red. "All of your training revolved around the gates. Do you truly think that intensity and conviction wouldn't imprint itself upon your very spirit?"

"Why have I been unable to up until now?"

"We had not met so pieces of your power were missing." The man waved him away. "We are out of time. Call my name to awaken the power that made you one of Konoha's strongest. Show this mutated whelp the pride your master built within you."

Lee opened his eyes as Tosen's hand struck for him.

"Rise from ash, Sokyoku." The katana morphed into flames and wrapped around his forearms and shins. The fire hardened into small

diamond-shaped ruby plates that feathered one over another, finally materializing as gauntlets and greaves. "Shomon open!"

Bringing his arm up in a highblock, Lee braced the defense with his off hand as Tosen's claw slammed into the gauntlet. Sparks showered off the clash as the ground compressed under Lee's feet. He rotated around the arm and shot straight for Tosen's stomach, landing a punch that made the hollowfied man gasp out and stumble back.

Lee sprung away as Tosen grabbed at his gut with his lower arms. He cringed as he felt the muscle fibers in his shoulder fray. So, the damage still occurred in a soul. At least, it was reduced when compared to a normal human body. It sadly remained significant in comparison to the simple exhaustion that occurred when he used his special elixir.

I will need to recreate that mixture before I resume my training.

Spotting a mass of orange hair behind one of the large building remains, Lee zipped over and moved the debris aside. Rangiku reclined against another rock, her misshapen arm draped across her belly.

"I kind of pissed him off when I got one of his eyes." She smiled through the pain. "He got this arm with some kind of sound technique. Maybe a few ribs as well."

"Can you run on your own?"

"I was just being lazy and getting my wind back. He's being more careful, but I think I can get his other eye." She struggled to sit up. "Why's your skin so red?"

"It is a side effect of using the fourth gate."

Her head turned as the ground shook.

"Looks like he is coming this way again."

"I can handle him from here." He held up his plated arm. "Thank you for this chance."

"But-"

Lee stepped back and blasted up high into the air. Stretching out a single leg, he grabbed the back of his knee and tucked into a tight spin. He sailed toward Tosen as the other trained his remaining eye on him.

"Konoha." Lee let go of his leg in the final rotation and sent his heel smashing down on top of Tosen's head, earning an echoing crack. "Kabutowari."

A split etched down the center of Tosen's face as it whipped back, the black and purple reiatsu quickly filling in the gap. Lee frowned and popped his knee fully back into socket. He dashed behind and kicked Tosen up. Appearing behind him, Lee clutched skin and fur then twisted into a tight rotation.

"Omote Renge!" He pile-drove Tosen headfirst into the street, the earth rippling as it made room for the deep crater. Lee clapped his hands, blowing himself back as another La Mirada arced past him. "You are truly resilient, Tosen-san. The ground is not hard enough to provide me with a strong enough base."

An idea fired in his head and Lee hit the ground in a dead sprint, heading in the direction of Karin.

"Karin-san!" He jumped up so he could see around. "Karin!"

"I'm here you ass!" She climbed over a broken ledge with a scowl. "You are going to owe me dinner for a month!"

"Agreed." He landed in front of her. "Karin-san, can your energy chains hold someone his size?"

"I've never tried, but they should."

"I need two of them."

"Okay."

Her voice trailed off into a scream as he pulled her onto his back and took off back to Tosen. They reappeared high in the air above the monstrosity and Karin released the chains, piercing the traitor in the chest. Lee gripped the chains tightly, shook Karin off, and yanked them back as hard as he could.

"Rangiku-san, catch her!"

Tosen sailed up to him, his eyes beginning to glow lime-green.

"Ura Renge!"

Lee struck in a blinding fury of kicks, each time pulling the behemoth back into another strike. His feet sunk deeper with each kick as Tosen's bones snapped and tissue became mush. The cero died as a foot crushed the hollowfied face. With a furious yell, Lee choked up on the chains and wrenched them back while extending both his legs in a double kick. Tosen's body folded at the spine as the force of the blow bulged out his back.

A gargled noise escaped Tosen's mouth as his reiatsu plummeted. The hollowfied body shrank and flaked away, exposing the battered remains of the true Kaname Tosen. The chains released him and gently wrapped around Lee as his eyes closed and exhaustion claimed him.

He may lose. He may only register as a small annoyance. That wasn't what this was about. What mattered was that Naruto had placed faith in him to hold the line. That wasn't the first time he carried that kind of weight. However, it was the first time someone had done it at the risk of losing a loved one. As quiet as his trainer

had been about the end of his last life, he knew enough to guess that putting Hinata in harm's way was probably resulting in some serious turmoil. The Earl sounded pretty terrifying, regardless of how confident Naruto was in his girlfriend. For Naruto to prioritize Aizen over her- he couldn't mess things up this time. This was just as important as a rescue. So while he might not stand a chance, Aizen wouldn't notice the sand cloud's purpose until it was too late.

But damn, did he enjoy wiping the smug grin off of Aizen's face.

He'd left the cave at top speed, blasting past bewildered Arrancar and blurring even faster into a Shunpo. He went straight for the head and Aizen barely had enough time to turn around and draw his sword.

"Looks like you need more than a finger this time." Ichigo grinned as shock covered all of Aizen's features. "Let's see how well you block this one. Getsuga Tensho!"

Black reiatsu outlined in red burst to life on the top half of his blade. He swung hard, using the projectile to push Aizen down toward the ground. Ichigo used another Shunpo to come up below and fired another crescent blast. Aizen held out his palm and summoned a green energy shield to block the attack, but Ichigo appeared in front of him and stabbed forward. Aizen pulled his Zanpakuto through the first Getsuga and deflected the stab.

Ichigo let himself move with the redirect and flipped over Aizen's head, unleashing a full wave with the movement. The traitor buckled as the two energy attacks converged and pressed down. The Substitute charged for another kill strike and Aizen's reiatsu roared to life. Like a solid wall, it stopped Ichigo in his tracks as Aizen summoned another barrier and escaped.

"Hello, Ichigo Kurosaki, it has been a while." Aizen's smirk reappeared and he lightly dusted himself off. "You have improved dramatically since our last meeting. No, that is not quite right. You

have improved dramatically since your first miserable fight with Nnoitra."

Ichigo scowled and bit his tongue.

"I must say. I am pleasantly surprised. Perhaps if you'd had this kind of resolve and ability then, you wouldn't have failed so spectacularly in rescuing your friend. Orihime says hello by the way."

Forcing to keep his face neutral and his spiritual pressure even, Ichigo prepared to renew the assault but Aizen held up a single finger.

"Once, Ichigo. Only once shall I allow you to catch me off guard like that."

Ichigo grinned as a familiar presence appeared on the rooftops below.

"Only once, huh?"

"Futon: Odama Rasenshuriken."

Easily twice the length of Naruto's body, the shining mass of spiraling blue reiryoku buzzed past them and into the Garganta. The attack expanded into an all-consuming sphere as it roared like a typhoon and lit up the void. An agonizing shriek came from further in as a large purple eye opened wide and recoiled.

The edges of the Garganta began to shrink.

"Yeah, I saw you in there," Naruto shouted and readied another one with the help of two clones. "I'll keep lobbing them until you close that damn gate."

The attack soared up again. The hidden creature shrieked and vomited up a pool of black sludge. Dozens of Gillian-class Menos took shape from the mire, but the Rasenshuriken shredded through them and expanded again, further damaging the creature.

Aizen disappeared with a Shunpo and Ichigo dove straight down after him.

"Naruto, head's up!"

The blonde blocked Aizen's slash with a strange kunai as his gold eyes narrowed.

"So, you're the bastard making everyone's life miserable." Naruto growled out as he locked the blade against the traitors. "The Garganta's closing, do it."

One clone punched the other out of existence and then tackled Aizen to the ground. The clone stabbed down with a generic kunai. Aizen caught the wrist and slashed the clone in two. A soft hiss emanated through the dispersing smoke. Naruto leapt back as the entire building exploded. Ichigo caught his wrist and pulled him up higher as flames lapped at their feet.

"You rigged the entire building?"

"I figured he'd come after me when he realized I could close the door."

"How'd you know that thing was in there?"

"Sage Mode." Naruto glanced down with a frown. "That didn't slow him down too much. I've got to keep moving for Hinata. Drop me and hit him hard as he comes out, eleven o'clock."

Ichigo let go and flew in the right direction. Aizen emerged in a swirl of flame and burnt clothing. He spun and held up his Zanpakuto as Ichigo neared him.

"Kudakero Kyoka Suigetsu."

Ichigo cut, slicing from shoulder to hip. Aizen's face paled in shock as crimson burst from his torso. Almost in slow motion, he fell back into the fire. Ichigo's face scrunched up in confusion.

That was-

His thoughts were interrupted as blinding pain consumed his spine and abdomen. Horrified brown eyes drifted down to the blood stained blade protruding from his gut.

"You have my praise, Ichigo Kurosaki." Aizen's winded voice carried a pained wheeze. "You and your ally pushed me to the point I had to utilize the special ability of my Zanpakuto. I had never desired to do so, and yet, you left me know choice."

Grabbing Ichigo by the collar, he withdrew the sword and held Ichigo in the air.

"How?" Ichigo choked out.

"Did they never tell you about my power? Kyoka Suigetsu produces a complete hypnosis of all your senses. Everything you perceive is under my authority."

"You."

Ichigo went to spin, but Aizen stabbed again, puncturing a lung.

"Don't worry though. I have deactivated the hypnosis already. I see no reason to deceive you, Ichigo Kurosaki. After all, one should be fully aware of their demise."

Aizen flung him over to another rooftop. Ichigo coughed out a strangled cry as his back impacted painfully with the tile. God, he couldn't breathe. Every movement burned and stretched what felt like a completely solid organ. All he wanted was to hold his breath so the lung wouldn't try and fail to expand.

"Now." Aizen ran a hand threw his hair. "Perhaps you would like to tell me what your friend was plotting with that clone of his."

"Aizen-taicho!" A petite woman appeared between them. Her raven hair was in a bun tied up in cloth as she meekly clutched her

Zanpakuto in front of her. "Aizen-taicho, please, stop this!"

"Momo?" Aizen smiled and sheathed his Zanpakuto. "You are looking well."

That's Momo Hinamori, Aizen's old lieutenant? What is she doing her- no. Ichigo went to call out but the words constricted in his throat bloody throat.

"Aizen-taicho, why are you doing this? Please - please turn yourself in. I don't want to." Her voice caught in her chest. "I don't want to have to fight you. Even though I'm a lot weaker than you, if you don't surrender, as a member of the Gotei 13, I will have to fight you."

Ichigo clenched his teeth and tried to sit up. He'd heard all about this. Everyone commented on how sweet and kind this girl was. She was friends with everyone and had loved Aizen like family. He'd intentionally used it to mess with her head, and from what people said, she did not know which way was up after his betrayal. Significant psychological damage had been the professional term people whispered about. Damn it, they knew she had already escaped from medical imprisonment twice. Did no one think that this was the first place she would go if Aizen appeared?

Move Ichigo! He's going to kill her if you don't move.

"Momo, you don't want to hurt me do you?" He held his arms out warmly and tilted his head forward. "Momo, look at me. You don't want to, right?"

She shook her head as sniffles were carried by the wind.

Aizen took a small step toward her and she immediately brought her blade up.

"Hajike Tobiume." The blade straightened and two prongs formed on either side. "Stay back! I don't know if it is you or Gin or whoever, but until I know the truth, I will - I will-"

Her shoulder's shook as a silent sob cut off her words.

Come on, one move Ichigo. Dig deep and throw it all out.

"Momo, you know the truth." Aizen moved right in front of her and let his hands fall to his sides. "I have faith in you, Momo. I have faith that you can see the truth."

"I-."

"If you truly feel I am a traitor." Aizen lifted his chin so the point of her Zanpakuto was mere inches from his neck. "Cut me down as the lieutenant of the Fifth Division - as my precious lieutenant."

She gasped and froze as tears dripped onto her feet. Her body sagged as more sobs wracked her frame. Fear backed adrenaline surged into Ichigo's veins as the telltale smirk tugged at Aizen's skyward lips.

"Hinamori." Potent reiatsu consumed Zangetsu's upper half as Ichigo shakily sat up. "He's going to-"

Aizen grabbed the hem of her Shihakusho and placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Sleep well, Momo." Aizen pressed his palm to her chest. "Hado Eighty-Eight: Hiryu Gekizoku Shinten Raiho."

A condensed beam of raging lighting tore through her. Ichigo swung desperately.

"Getsuga Tensh-"

The blinding electric cannon consumed him along with everything in its path.

Momo Hinamori didn't feel any pain, not even the emotional pain that had accompanied her beloved captain's first betrayal. Doubt had

plagued every moment of her life since his plan began. His fake death, him trying to kill her, the hope he was secretly working as a double agent to protect everyone from Gin. She'd made up all sorts of silly excuses for why he did what he did. Anything was acceptable so long as it offered a chance for him to come back and be her captain again. The man who always gave her that proud smile when she met a goal with excellence. That same warm and gentle man who taught her so much and cared for her like a father.

She wasn't willing to let those personal feelings hurt others this time. As soon as she felt his familiar reiatsu, she knew there was only one way for it to end. As morbid as it may sound, being here, the last moments of her consciousness cradled in his arms, surrounded by the scent that always made her feel so protected. It was better for her this way. Because, no matter how much the reality hurt, she could pass on believing a small part of his actions toward her were honest.

"Aizen-taicho." Her voice came out so soft and weak she wasn't sure if he could hear it. "Can I… can I hug you just once?"

He pulled her arms over his neck so she could clasp her hands around them.

"Of course, Momo."

She smiled through her tears and held the back of his neck tight. She knew deep down, traitor or not, she couldn't fight against him. She cared about him too much for that, but that didn't mean it absolved her from her responsibilities as a Shinigami and friend to Toshiro. Instead of conflict, she could provide everyone with the one thing they didn't have. He had such an intricate conspiracy, no one in the Gotei 13 knew his plans.

She was the only one he would allow to get close enough to plant a bug.

Discreetly, she activated a small Kido directly into his agitated system from the base of his skull. After fighting and taking damage, the slight trace of it would escape him even if he knew what she was doing, and considering he knew how strongly she felt for him, he wouldn't have a clue.

"I love you, Dad."

His arms tightened around her ever so slightly.

"I know."

She smiled as her arms went limp and she collapsed fully into his chest.

It's up to you now, Shiro-kun.

Gaara's head hung low as his shallow breaths blew the sweat from his lips. His body had gone numb some time ago, or maybe it was a short while. The seconds were dragging by so who really knew. Naruto hadn't left that long ago. No wait, that memory was partially a hallucination. Naruto had a tail in that one.

Heh, silly fox tail.

He bit down on his lip and tried to focus his vision. His entire brain felt like it was on fire trying to stay awake and keep his sand aloft. Trying to swallow the dryness in his mouth, he lazily looked up as a shadow appeared before him.

"Gaara, hey, Gaara, can you hear me?"

"Naruto?"

"The Garganta is closing and all the Arrancar are taking to the sky because of it. You need to do whatever you are going to do now." Gaara peered around Naruto. "Gaara?"

"Good, no tail." He lolled his head back against the downed tree's trunk. The Arrancar were indeed making their escape. "Has my sand cloud diminished?"

"Not a bit."

Gaara swung his arm up and the cloud exploded into a slithering swarm of spears. Reaching up ahead of the retreating forces, the spines arched inward and rained down on the mass of Arrancar. The enemy scattered. Some chose to blast away the encroaching death while others attempted to flee. However, every destroyed tendril was replaced and every exit was closed. The sand wove tighter and tighter with each pass, skewering and absorbing as it went.

A little more.

He could feel his body grow colder with every passing moment. If he didn't hurry- wait, don't rush. He lacked the power to crush them as whole. Catching them individually remained the only sure way to end this nightmare.

Although, that wouldn't be too hard to shape.

Letting his arm drop, the sand bloomed out like a flower as new points took shape on its surface. The disoriented Arrancar looked around at clear sky for a moment, and then it snapped shut with an ear popping clap.

"Holy sh-"

"I will take up your offer to go to the medics now, Naruto." Gaara released his control over the cloud, allowing it to pour down to the ground. "I believe I may have pushed myself a little too much."

Hinata ducked under a slash and caught the malevolent orb in his hand. The force pushed them down through the roof into the store room below. Spinning out of the way, she blocked each rapid swing

of his broadsword as he continued to push her back across the floor. Guiding the blade underneath her, she lashed out with a reiryoku powered kick, forcing the energy out of her heel and into his gut.

Spinning on a single hand still holding the blade, she swiped out with her claws, slicing the front of his coat. She flipped to her feet with inhuman grace, perching on his wide shoulders. He looked up and she smashed her fist straight into his face, his entire frame rippling as the ground crunched beneath another torrent of her energy.

He grasped his blade with both hands and stabbed back over his head. She vaulted over and away from him, sliding into a stance with her front fist outstretched. Her muscles groaned in protest as she kept her arms up and at the ready. It had been like this for almost an hour. Nothing she did had any real effect on him. It was like her hits, physical and Juken based, weren't connecting. It honestly felt like she was wailing against an extremely thick costume more than a living body.

That didn't frighten her half as much as his demeanor. He hadn't spoken a word since he cursed Allen's name. His eyes reflected nothing but crazed rage. She'd never faced someone so… disconnected. Her opponents had personalities and ideals. Even that monster Danzo sent recognized pain and lashed out in anger. This Earl, his face just remained frozen with that menacing grin and his eyes continued looking through her to her companion spirit. Maybe that was it, he might kill her without even realizing it.

He was that unconcerned with her.

Fortunately, she possessed the greater speed and technique. Despite how insanely heavy his blows were, how they jostled every nerve and tooth and joint when she blocked, he hadn't been able to land a crippling hit on her. Well, a hit she couldn't recover from. It was odd - the sensation of actually feeling her liver rebuilding itself during one of the brief periods she put distance between them. Even now, her energy coursed beneath her skin. The once sickening

feeling of something slithering now a comforting reminder of protection.

That wouldn't help end it, and that was the real issue. No matter how often she avoided getting hurt, eventually, that would change. She needed to hit him deeper than she had been. Her one attempt at her energy sword had failed miserably since he immediately focused on it. She'd refrained from using it since then so he wouldn't realize that was her best move and become even more cautious against it.

I need to form it faster or disguise its creation. I need to do it at the next opportunity.

The Earl lunged at her again. She parried his decapitating chop and stabbed at him with her open hand. He twisted past it far more effectively than his girth should allow and readied another orb of the sickening energy that radiated off of him. She back-flipped over the arm, catching it with bent knees and swinging around in a half loop. She extend her reiryoku whip and spun between, then around his legs, tangling him up as the beams cut into his rubbery flesh.

He swept low with the blade, but she twisted around it, coming up in front of his exposed torso. She unleashed a streaking barrage of barely visible strikes. Ten a second, twenty a second, thirty a second, she drove fist and palm faster and harder into him. Every attempt to bring his arms down was met with a sharp checking strike. Every step was limited to a tiny shuffle as she used her feet to trip him up.

"Kaiten Danpen!"

The beams flowed from her palms again and she whirled into a severing helix of violet energy. Emerging from the technique, her reiatsu hardened around her hand, shaping into a crackling blade. She darted past him, slicing at his side. Whipping around on her toes, she went to stab.

Where did he go?

He emerged from the shadows behind her and kicked her square in the back and through the front window. Springing to her feet, she barely brought her arms up as he furiously began hacking away. Dark, nearly black, blood seeped out from his clenched teeth and wounded side.

"You hurt me again, Allen." His downward chops came down harder and more frantic. "Why do you continue to hurt me inside and out!"

Hinata struggled to push away and escape the storm of steel, but they came so fast she could only manage to keep her arms above her head. With every hit, it felt like her arms would break in spite of the protective Zanpakuto layer. She needed to do something. She need to-

The Earl let out a tortured demonic scream as flaming dark matter ignited on his blade. He struck, the shockwave destroying the nearby buildings. Again and again, he hammered down charged strikes, each point of contact punctuated by an eruption of malignant energy.

He lifted high for a final strike and a gloved hand caught the hilt and firmly held it in place. The Earl's head snapped around like an owl's as the cloaked figure wrenched the blade free.

Naruto switched places with another Bunshin and wrapped a dangerous amount of energy around him. His Shunshin flung him like a comet over the cityscape. Faster, he had to go faster. He felt it, damn it, he felt the spiking dark energy and Hinata's flickering presence. He'd wasted too much time and too much energy trying to be everywhere at once. One giant Rasenshuriken would have been enough, but no, he had to make absolutely sure with two. The damn Shinigami could have handled the Arrancar, but no, he had to save the dumbasses too freaking weak to defend themselves. Bouncing around like a god damned pinball from clone to clone, smashing and fighting every step of the way. He just couldn't help himself could he? He just had to step in and do the right thing, and now, like every other damned time, it might cost him.

"Faster." He pushed more energy into his feet and tore down the street. "Faster!"

He launched himself up high into the air as the ground rushed by beneath him. Catapulting himself further with another Shunshin, his heart stopped as the scene met his vision. The Earl and his cloaked crony faced each other in a tense staring contest as a smoldering crater crumbled beside them.

No, no, no, no.

He didn't have the energy to waste on a random attack, and without seeing Hinata, he couldn't risk something as big as a Rasenshuriken or even an Odama Rasengan.

"No, you're right, my Shadow. I lost myself in a sea of painful memories. Thank you for preventing me from making a terrible mistake." The Earl turned and sadly looked down in the crater, completely ignoring Naruto. "Although, I am afraid the window to rectify it is startlingly small."

"Get away from her!"

Naruto blasted straight at the Earl, wind energy extending off the blade of his Zanpakuto. The shadow pulled the gray man back as Naruto swung at his head. The blonde landed and formed a Rasengan in his off hand. The unwelcome chill of déjà vu tingling along his spine. The image of a monstrous Jugo overlaid with the Earl. And like then, he didn't dare to look back at her.

"So the hero arrives after abandoning the heroine." The humor in the Earl's voice from earlier was absent. Only a cold mocking glint coated each syllable. "How many did you save today? A few, a dozen! Maybe you saved this entire miserable city. Does it make you feel worthwhile? Let me ask you, hero. Why do you continue to sacrifice that wonderful creature for others?"

"Shut up."

"Do you undervalue how much love she has for you? Or do you take advantage of her feelings so you can play hero to the masses while she suffers for it?"

"I said shut the hell up!" A single clone popped into existence and reshaped the sphere in his hand. "Futon: Rasenshuriken!"

The technique roared to life. He flung it so hard his rear foot came off the ground, and it sailed so fast the dust wasn't disturbed until after the spiraling star had passed. The shadow leapt out in front of the Earl as an aura of midnight-purple energy rolled out of his destroyed midsection. The projectile clashed with the aura as each one feasted on the other.

The Earl fired a ball of dark matter. Naruto blocked it with his Zanpakuto. However, the flimsy orb splashed around the kunai like a gel, washing over his hand and arm, corroding flesh. The Jinchuriki held strong and snarled as the Earl blasted his clone away. The clash between energies ceased and the cloaked figure collapsed to its knees.

"It appears you have been badly damaged twice now, my Shadow." The Earl dismissed his broadsword into a small portal and placed his hands on the figure's shoulders. "I suppose you will require some tender loving care."

The Earl ripped the head off as dark matter gushed from the decapitated neck. Kicking the body closer to Naruto, he tucked the cranium under his arm and spun on his heal.

Naruto bit back the urge to call out to the Earl. He'd done enough stupid stuff already. Hinata needed help and he didn't have the energy or time to fight that monster.

"Tyki Mikk Shadow, self-destruct."

Naruto's heart lodged in his throat as the energy escaping the corpse revolved around it and plunged back within it. He dove into

the pit, scooped up Hinata's still form, and used an internal Shunshin to carry them as far as he could.

The body detonated behind him, the initial pulse knocking him off his feet. The dome of black and purple energy swelled out and swallowed up everything in the vicinity. He held her as tight as he could, mumbling a prayer as the blast crept up to his knees and then sent them flying.

He wasn't sure if he got knocked out or what really happened after his face smashed through the ground. All he knew was the smoke burned his nose and with that and the dust he couldn't see well at all. He scrambled to his feet, falling forward as the charred remains of his lower legs screamed in protest.

"Hinata."

He croaked out a mix of blood and dust. Crawling on his belly with his good arm, he inched toward a small hill of rubble as the dirt barely registered against his raw blistering skin. Agonizingly slow seconds ticked by as he ascended. He'd tried so hard to hold onto her. Where was she? Damn it, all his senses felt fried to crap.

Reaching the mound's peak, his breath caught in his chest and tears mixed with the grime on his face. Hinata lay still in a basin barely outside the blast radius. The protective sleeves of her Zanpakuto rested over her in shredded ribbons as the flayed remains of her burned coat cushioned her from the ground.

The cracked silver mask peppered with dots of crimson.

"No." He rolled pathetically down the other side and up to her. Climbing to his knees, he gently lifted her to his chest and buried his head in her hair. "No, no, this can't be- I need to think. I need to calm down and think."

His legs were gone so he couldn't carry her, and with a hand unusable, he couldn't summon a clone to carry her. Summoning a

stable Bunshin without hand seals took energy he didn't have. Damn it, what could he do? With all the rest of the damage all across the city, there was no way of knowing when someone could show. He needed a big boost. Yeah, that's right. He needed the fox's power.

"Ky- Kyo, I need a shot of the Kyubi's energy." He held Hinata tighter, when nothing happened his heart ached. "Kyo, give me something. I don't need enough to heal. Just let me have enough to make a clone, a single miserable clone."

His voice cracked as a grief laden spasm tore through his chest.

"Kyo, you have to hear me. I can't tell if she's breathing." His body shook as his words slurred together with restrained sobs. "Kyo please."

Only silence and powerlessness greeted his soft whisper.

"Please."

IMPORTANT INFORMATION: For anyone who just finished this and now desires to write an angry message/review or feel they can not longer read this story, I have provided a semi-spoiler below my normal end of chapter notes to calm you down. I ask you read that before making any hasty, emotionally fueled, choices. If you're okay with this chapter then please stop reading once you reach the bold warning.

Author's Notes:

I was not expecting this chapter to be so long, but couldn't find a good breaking point without turning in two really short ones. The Momo scene was not initially planned, however, I'm glad that I included it. Originally, I didn't intend to have her show up in Rend at all. However, it wouldn't be true to her character not to show up if Aizen was so close, considering this is technically before her 'recovery' in the canon. Couple that with being a Kido master and

already escaping confinement twice, I couldn't not include her. I wanted to give it some poignancy though and hoped I adequately showed the mixed emotions she had. It led to her using the Kido bug (more on how that works in future chapters) instead of Naruto having a minature Bunshin tag along.

My proof reader brought up an interesting point that he felt Hinata got put in these injured states too much. I was worried about that too so I went and added up all the major injuries/deaths from Asunder until now. Surprisingly, the person at the top of the list was Shino (because of his training), followed closely by Naruto, and then significantly lower in third was Hinata (who only had one more instance over Lee and Gaara). I told him the problem was not that she had the most hardship/near death scenes. The problem was that being the second main character she had more high profile fights against stronger opponents, and unlike Naruto, did not have the healing factor to pick herself back up instantly. All you have to do is look at the Danzo fight to see what I mean. Naruto had like three early fatal blows in that match alone versus Hinata's one against Jugo.

As for why I'm putting a spoiler-ish blurb at the bottom, I lost enough readers with the Danzo arc in Asunder, and then again with the ending, to know sometimes events like this can set people off. It is better for me to give a little heads up than have a reader walk away angry.

Anyway, I'm trying to get the next chapter put together to conclude Section 1 of Rend and conclude this invasion arc. So if I can't write over the next few weeks, it isn't left on a major cliffhanger.

SEMI- SPOILER WARNING BELOW

ONE MORE WARNING

Okay, so for anyone freaking out about Hinata's condition, let me point out a few key items of importance. This isn't a full spoiler so I won't tell you how the last scene plays out. However, if you take these thoughts to heart, you will figure out it is probably not as bad as you fear.

The first is her recovery rate that has been in play since the Danzo arc in Asunder.

The second is Naruto's senses being scrambled/fried from the explosion and fatigue.

The third is I described what (not who) was damaged.

The fourth is that it was told through Naruto's point of view and he's been worried about something bad happening.

Ashes

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 12:

Get up. Come on, get up.

Ichigo placed his sandaled feet against the stone ceiling that both imprisoned him like a coffin and protected him from the layers of debris burying him. Dust filtered down through gaps, alongside streams of light, as he pushed up, his reiatsu climbing as he shoved harder. The stone barely shifted as the hundreds of pounds rested atop of it.

"Get up!"

His reiatsu surged to its peak as he kicked hard, launching the rock upward as the uppermost layers scattered. Quickly climbing to his feet, he darted out of the temporary grave as the rock crashed back down, resealing the space. Immediately falling to his knees, he pressed his free arm against the two holes in his chest to staunch the bleeding.

"Damn it." He coughed roughly, more blood splattering on the ground beneath him. "I'm lucky. If it had been Byakuya, he'd have made sure I was dead or powerless."

His brown eyes drifted over to the half of the building not destroyed by Aizen's blast. The limp corpse of Momo Hinamori draped precariously over the edge. She'd saved him by jumping in. He knew she hadn't done it for his sake or even intentionally. Confronting Aizen was entirely personal for her. She probably knew what would

happen - maybe welcomed it. The latter thought tied a knot in his throat.

A small aspect of him could understand it. The thought of missing someone so badly it hurt to be alive. What he couldn't understand was how someone could be so cruel to exploit that feeling. How could Aizen take that pure devotion and use it to harm the very person who gave that devotion? He couldn't describe how wrong it felt. However, wishing there weren't monsters wouldn't help.

Taking down one of them would.

Ichigo forced himself to stand as the world swam. His spiritual power was keeping him from bleeding out, but that would only slow his encroaching death.

"I need to go after him again. Naruto's plan worked, but Aizen's a threat until someone stops him."

He went to leap into the sky after Aizen's reiatsu, but his vision lost focus again. The blood soaked his sleeve, making the fabric sticky and scratchy.

I can't be stupid. I was outclassed even without his Zanpakuto messing with my head. I need to get help first..

With a shrill whistle, a glimmering orange beam streaked vertically high into the sky, followed by another, then another. Ichigo spun as more joined the previous. Reaching up amongst the clouds so that he could barely see them, the ends began to shoot back and forth between one another.

"What the hell?" Ichigo's face paled as the pentagram took shape. "That thing covers all of Seirei-"

The sky flashed and Ichigo's words died in the light.

Nel pursed her lips as her wide eyes wandered over the lab and its numerous blinking machines. She'd folded her hands into the sleeves of her kimono and pressed the bottoms of her sandaled feet together. While curiosity and wonder prevailed, the rigid nature of her posture demonstrated an underlying nervousness.

Mayuri Kurotsuchi always summoned that kind of effect.

He hovered around her, sticking sensors to her temples, filling syringes with blood, and waving various scanners around as his assistant catalogued the data.

"What an interesting little specimen you have brought me." The crazed scientist sounded almost giddy as he fluidly transitioned from one test to another. "I have never had the pleasure of studying a live Arrancar, a complete version at that."

"Hey, watch where you're poking, clown guy!"

"Fascinating, so your mask does possess a degree of tactilation."

"My mask does what?"

"Touch, you stupid child. Your mask has the sense of touch. That is why you felt pressure."

"No. I just don't want you touching it, you creepy perv."

"Nemu, we will be forgoing the anesthetic during dissection."

"Yes, Mayuri-sama."

Nel started flailing wildly while hurling insults, but Kurotsuchi easily kept her in place. Yamamoto sighed and returned his attention to the scene outside the lab's window. Gaara's last attack had been magnificent. No, the entire strategy displayed remarkable foresight and confidence in his companions. Naruto Uzumaki's role was equally inspired, both in understanding Gaara's unspoken plan and in knowing how best to ensnare the Arrancar army.

He would be remiss not to acknowledge their strategy and teamwork were superior to those of the other Shinigami. While many of the captains were still far stronger than the otherworld four, it could not be ignored they were playing a vital role in the counterattack and a large part of that contribution stemmed from their unorthodox, by traditional standards, way of perceiving and managing the battlefield.

It begged the question as to how similar their tactics were to others from that world. Was such seamless cooperation unique to them or was it standard? If the latter was the case, the potential benefits to unseated Shinigami could not be ignored. Small cohesive units could drastically diminish the individual weaknesses of its members. Cases like today, where any unfortunate soul caught alone perished, would no longer be an issue. Of course, such thinking strayed from the traditional methods of battle, and while slight in the immediate, could have repercussions on the strengths of future captains. They provided the backbone to the Gotei 13. Would the future division leaders be weaker because they never faced their battles alone?

His hands went to the journal tucked into the fold of his shirt.

Despite what it contained, he could not let the pages of an old book make him forget there was always a future to prepare for. No matter how severe the current obstacle, no action could be taken that would hinder Soul Society against the next calamity. It did not matter if it was Yhwach, Aizen, or even that man, the Earl of Millennium.

"You're too dignified to allow me the opportunity to do a comprehensive study of this strange Arrancar." Mayuri snatched Nel by the back of her shirt as she attempted to leap from the table. "Is a polygraph all you truly wish?"

"For now." Yamamoto left the journal in its place and pushed himself away from the window. He tapped his cane sharply and Nel immediately calmed down. "Are you working for Sosuke Aizen?"

"No."

"Did he create you?"

"I think so."

"Be clear, child."

"I don't really remember anything before I woke up in the desert with Pesche and Dondochakka." Her lips quivered slightly as sadness radiated off her cherubic features. "I really hope they're alright."

Yamamoto raised his bushy brows and looked to Mayuri for an answer.

"The crack in her mask is not natural and continually leaking pure reiryoku. Because the loss occurs without any form of pressure, she is surviving a condition that should be fatal. Instead, the leak destabilizes the reishi that comprises her entire being, making it likely her form, powers, and even memory, are all reduced."

"She was attacked?"

"Possibly, or Aizen did it intentionally as either an experiment or some other purpose."

"Wrong! Nnoitra said he did it, not Aizen."

"Nnoitra?" Yamamoto clasped his hands over the top of his cane.

"That bad guy chasing me when Naruto and Ichigo saved you."

"Why did he do this to you?"

"Don't know." Nel relaxed and let her feet drop over the edge and let them swing. "He was a mean man who liked to hurt people. He really enjoyed hurting Ichigo and said all sorts of mean things to everyone. I don't think he liked me because I was the third Espa-"

She slapped both hands over her mouth.

Mayuri's lips curled up in a wickedly gleeful grin.

"So I will get to dissect an Arrancar today, an Es-"

"Penguin!" Nel sprang to her feet while on the table and struck a pose. "Pesche, Dondochakka, and I are the Great Desert Brothers, the Espenguins!"

The room went silent for a moment, Nel subtly repeating the end of her heroic pose.

"Nemu, let us go with the size two buzz-saw today."

"Yes, Mayuri-sama."

Nel shrieked and attempted to dive off the table again, but Mayuri nonchalantly pulled her back to the table.

Yamamoto's fingers dug into the knotted head of the cane. An Arrancar once ranked third amongst the Espada had been in their midst the entire time. Did Ichigo Kurosaki and the others know of this? Did Gaara know? She had been under constant observation from both the Gotei and the Onmitsukido and shown no signs of deceit. However, Aizen had created an Arrancar specifically to seal his Ryujin Jakka. Creating an informant, an unwitting one, would be a simple matter for someone so treacherous.

"Hm, I can't decide whether to start with the brain or the other internal organs."

The lab shook as a bright light flashed in the sky. Yamamoto whirled around as a pit formed in his stomach, the first time in centuries. Etched in malevolent orange against the backdrop of a darkening sky, the pentagram flashed again as every surface in Seireitei shuddered.

"What an interesting sight." Mayuri stepped up beside the aged captain. "I would normally assume it was a doomsday weapon of

some sort, but given Aizen is still standing beneath it, there must be something else to such a display."

"Discover all you can about the Arrancar child, but do not harm her." He cracked a cinder eye at Mayuri's frown. "Eliminating her without proof could merely be another of Aizen's ploys, one designed to drive a wedge between her caretakers and the rest of us."

"You sure you are not being soft again, Commander? I seem to recall you gave a similar justification to us when Yhwach began building his empire" Mayuri brushed off the warning blast of reiatsu then went back to the table. "Fine, fine, I will work with my hands tied."

The pentagram flashed and a pillar of white shot down from it. Yamamoto could only close his eyes as light enveloped every trace of shadow in the room. Every fiber of his being vibrated as the white pierced through his eyelids and the air rumbled in his ears. He could faintly hear Nel screaming, lost in the dull noise. What weapon was this? There was no pain, nor did it seem like it harmed him.

"Nemu, collect every ounce of data this produces."

"Yes, Mayuri-sama."

The light vanished as quickly as it appeared, the ominous sigil vanishing from the unblemished blue sky. His lips curling up into an unamused snarl, Yamamoto forced his reiatsu into his Zanpakuto. The blade's spirit grumbled in the back of his mind as it forcefully awakened. Pushing energy into the bottom of his feet, his Shunpo carried him out of the lab and halfway across the city in a single step. With another, he appeared in the sky across from the traitor.

"Sosuke Aizen." The wooden casing shredded off of his sword far more slowly than usual. "What have you done?"

Aizen almost appeared dazed for a moment, studying his hand like it was brand new. An uncharacteristically somber expression subtly

tugged at his lips. It vanished the instant he noticed the old captain and his chin tilted up as his smug grin reappeared. He ran a hand through his slicked back hair and placed another on his sword's sheath.

"This war between us needs no interlopers. It will be my forces versus your Shinigami."

"What are you babbling about, boy?"

"My friend told me an interesting tale, Genryusai-dono. About an empire and its god who the original Gotei 13 defeated. The key word is defeated, not destroyed. You see, this empire and this god disappeared in order to bide their time for when their god, Yhwach, could recover and reclaim his powers."

Yamamoto felt his eyes widen slightly and Aizen's grin deepened as a result.

"Of course, Genryusai-dono, you know all about Yhwach. You let him live after you defeated him a thousand years ago, after all. What you did not know, what almost no one knew, was that this empire used their ability to reconstruct reishi, the very matter of our world, to hide in plain sight. More specifically, they hid within the shadows of their hated enemy's own city."

The aged Shinigami drew his sword as tongues of flame licked down the edge.

"An infant like you has a lot of gall talking to me as if you were reading a story."

Aizen chuckled, but made no move to draw his Zanpakuto.

"I apologize. I was merely reciting it in the manner told to me." Aizen pointed down at the city. "The Quincy Empire created a space, a dimension, literally within the shadows of Seireitei. What I did was reject that space."

"You converted the human girl's power into a weapon?"

"To a degree. My friend explained that these Quincy were powerful, having fed off of Soul Societies spiritually rich atmosphere for a thousand years. However, no matter how powerful an individual becomes, if the space they reside in no longer exists, they can no longer exist. Her power allowed us to reject their world, and since they only existed in that world, indirectly, we rejected them as well." Aizen slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out a navy blue cloth. "See that our guests from the other world get this. They will be able to explain just how grand this war will become."

Aizen tossed the item to Yamamoto and used a Shunpo to escape into the Garganta. Smoke billowed up from the city, obscuring the traitor as the void steadily closed. The old man caught the cloth, his fingers clenching around something solid at its center as all traces of power from the invader vanished.

Yamamoto peered down at the city as natural shadow crept back into place. While the light had not harmed the Shinigami, entire swaths of the city smoldered and crumbled into wreckage. One spot in particular stood as nothing more than a derelict crater. Not since the Gotei became the protectors of the city had it suffered such destruction.

They will be able to explain just how grand this war will become.

He focused on the item in his hand. A metal plate coated in blood rested in the middle of the headband, a strangle spiral shaped engraved in its metallic surface.

The way the point came off of the base almost made it look like a leaf.

"What the hell was that?" Karin quickly sat up and whipped her head around. "How are we still alive?"

"I can't answer either of those questions." Rangiku used her good arm to wipe sweaty grime off her forehead with a relieved sigh and offered a smile to Karin. "We're alive right? So, we have that going for us."

Karin nodded and brushed back Lee's dirty hair as he rested beside her. When that light blasted out from the pentagram, she had thrown herself over the unconscious fighter. Sure, if the beam had been destructive, it wouldn't have done crap, but at least she would have been holding someone she cared about as the end came.

"Do we need to get him to a medic?" Rangiku cradled her broken arm with a wince. "The Fourth Division isn't too far from here."

"There are more seriously wounded. He's mostly exhausted, and the damage he does have, I can handle."

"You have medical training?"

"Something like that." A dimming presence pinged in the back of her mind and she stood. "Watch him for a second. There's something I have to take care of."

Leaping over a mountain of rubble, she landed beside a large fissure. A cough echoed up from within as she hopped into it. Tosen's shattered Shinigami body sprawled out atop stone as red stained the dirt around him. Karin moved up next to him with a cold glare and readjusted her glasses.

"Whatever that transformation did to your body is causing a violent reaction to your energy. Lee thrashing you must have unbalanced what little stability there was left." Karin leaned over him. "I've seen enough experiments in my day to recognize one. You tried to go from Shinigami completely to an Arrancar and your system couldn't handle it."

"Yes, it seems that is the case."

"You're going to die, probably excruciatingly." She summoned the end of a reiryoku chain and held the sharpened point above him. "I can make it quick and painless for you."

"Revenge?"

"Mercy."

Tosen laughed in a sputtering bloody cough.

"Such a word is often used to justify the desire to kill."

"You're dead whether I do anything or not." She brought the point down closer. "I simply believe it is kinder to put down mutilated lab rats."

"So you say. Yet, by designating me as a mere animal, you dehumanize me. The same way any warrior does to their enemy. Mercy, kindness, in the end it is bloodshed."

"You say it like you don't believe you're the same way."

"I followed the path of justice, the path that my friend, brutally murdered by her Shinigami husband, believed in. My just-"

"We've all got sob stories." Karin rolled back onto her heels and retracted the chain. "Do you want to waste your last few seconds whining?"

"My last seconds?" His gray eyes stared up from behind his broken visor and he frowned. "The lingering effects of my transformation allow me to still see and it is wasted on a hole."

Karin remained silent. She could have bit out how symbolic the situation was, but that would be in poor taste. Someone, no matter how screwed up they were, deserved some semblance of peace in the end. She would have welcomed some for hers.

"I do like the color of your hair." His pupils clouded over again. "At least, I now have something to equate to the word vibrant."

She stepped back and his body swelled then exploded into blood.

Tilting her chin away, she swallowed the nausea in the back of her throat. No matter how many times she saw it, the cruel fate of failed experiments unsettled her. They always had. At one time, she could delude herself by zealously following Orochimaru's commands. It was about making her savior happy - being useful to him. His approval allowed her to ignore what she was actually doing.

She couldn't do that anymore, not after what happened under Danzo's rule to those he didn't find useful.

Repressing a chill, she climbed out of the pit. There wasn't time to focus on the past. Now that the battle had ended, it was becoming easier to detect everyone. The Shinigami could barely keep up with their own people. So it fell to her to patch Lee and their friends up. All of them were hurting, and as the only one still on her feet, she needed to make sure everyone would survive. If she couldn't heal them, then at least she could carry them to someone who could.

Was this what it was like to drown? No sound, no sight, no touch, nothing, but the cold dark reality you couldn't breathe. The eerie heart-breaking calm that came as muscles turned to sludge and the heart slowed. The feeling of the entire world fading away as everything faded into the depths.

He let this happen. It didn't matter that he knew she needed help. There was always one more person that could be helped along the way. She could last that extra second as he pulled someone out of a bad situation. She could handle that extra moment he took to make sure someone else was safe. She could compensate for the energy he lost with the extra clone that he made to take someone to the healers. He could do it all. He could save everyone.

He was wrong.

Naruto-kun

Why did he get involved again? He knew better. Deep in the bottom of his gut, under the heroics, under the morality and all the feelings of wanting to do the right thing and protect those in need, in the raw instinct of it all, he knew something like this would happen. It always happened.

Naruto-kun

Why did they decide the Earl was their responsibility? Because the monster sought them out in the void? Because they were some sort of god damned chosen? They didn't have any real responsibility to anything or anyone besides each other. There were at least a dozen in this god forsaken city as strong or stronger than them.

Why?

"I'm sorry, Hinata." His words escaped in a choked rasp of sorrow and ash. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Naruto-kun

"I left you alone. I left you alone again and I'm sorry."

"Naruto-kun." A hand gently pressed against his back. "Naruto, look at me."

Startled, he pulled back and looked at her in a crazed mix of turmoil and confusion. She closed her eyes and gave him a smile.

"Hinata?"

His face twisted through a hundred emotions as hit bit down on his lip. He shook his head slowly like he couldn't accept what he saw as his eyes welled. An uncontrollable spasm rippled through him as his

emotions smashed past the wall of numbness. Squeezing his eyes shut his head tipped down and rested against her shoulder.

"I'm okay, Naruto-kun. I'm okay."

He didn't respond. Instead, he just re-wrapped his arms around her and wept. This had to be some sick trick of the Earl or his own grief. He'd seen her. He'd felt her. This was something else messing with his head.

And he didn't care.

Gaara rubbed the fatigue from his face and rolled onto his side to alleviate the ache in his shoulder. Rangiku sat in the corner with her arm in a sling. Had Gin done that to her? It seemed unlikely, but the entire day had been filled with such occurrences.

"How long have I been out?"

Rangiku perked up and came over to him.

"Long enough." She frowned at the bandage on his shoulder. "The Fourth Division is barely keeping up just trying to get everyone stable. They made sure your wound wasn't life threatening and transferred some reiryoku to you so you wouldn't die. Unfortunately, we'll have to deal with our hindrances until they heal themselves in a day or two."

She lifted her arm a little.

"Did he do that to you?"

"It was Tosen. Gin wouldn't hurt me."

"Naïve thinking, considering he's a traitor."

"Gaara-"

"How bad were we hit?" He pushed himself up to a sitting position, ignoring his muscles' cries of protest. "I assume the invasion ended with the destruction of the Arrancar."

"Hey, don't just brush this-"

"Matsumoto-fukutaicho, I need a report."

She recoiled like he physically slapped her as hurt washed over her sharp features. He buried his regret under his normal stoicism. It was wrong of him, using their responsibilities as a shield. Worse, it was cowardly and only an excuse to put off a conversation he actively avoided for years.

He just couldn't handle it right now. He was too tired and his mind was too full. Dealing with the emotions she evoked was difficult on a day without invading armies, the Earl joining Aizen, and a traitor that drew Rangiku dangerously close to a very thin line between friend and foe.

"You're right, Gaara-taicho." She forced a smile to the surface. "I was selfish."

No, I am.

"It's been a long day for everyone. Please, what's going on?"

"Aizen used some kind of weapon that enveloped every inch, inside and outside, of the city in light. We have no idea what it was for. All the Arrancar were taken out and Tosen is dead due to injuries he sustained fighting Lee." She flicked the necklace that hung low on her chest with a chuckle. "That guy is scarily strong."

Gaara allowed himself to smile slightly despite knowing the necklace gesture was her way of being stubborn about him interrupting her. During their time training together, she would use it in an attempt to make him drop his guard or not be so serious. It never worked and she never stopped trying.

"Yes, I have been on the receiving end of his strikes."

"You'll have to fill me in on that later over drinks."

"If I have time, please, continue."

Her face tightened into a serious expression.

"We lost a lot of unseated Shinigami and almost everyone has some kind of injury. Most of our upper ranked Shinigami are okay."

"Most?"

She hesitated and his worry quickly filled in the gaps.

"Who, Rangiku?"

"Momo Hinamori, the lieutenant of Aizen's old division, confronted him and was killed. That Karin woman found Ichigo crawling toward the Fourth Division. He had been stabbed twice during his fight with Aizen."

"If he's here, he will be fine. What about Naruto and Hinata?"

"They're missing, Gaara."

Gaara shakily stood up and stumbled forward. Naruto said Hinata had been fighting the Earl. Chances were he went straight to her once their plan succeeded. If they hadn't show up yet, something bad happened - bad enough to keep those two down. The rescue scouts were likely already overburdened finding wounded. There may not be anything he could do, but for the friend that changed his life, even crawling around was better than nothing. Karin also seemed like an able tracker. Perhaps, they could work together.

"Where is Karin?"

"She went out looking for them." Rangiku placed a steadying hand on his good shoulder. "You're more likely to collapse some place

than find them. I'll go help her search."

He paused for a moment, then nodded his head in understanding.

"Thank you, I-"

His brain misfired as she gripped the back of his head and pressed her lips firmly against his.

She almost immediately pulled away with a grin as he stared at her dumbstruck.

"You're not the only one who can interrupt people, Gaara-taicho."

Spinning on her heel with a light skip, she exited the room, passing a stunned Lee and disappearing down the hall. The taijutsu user glanced back and forth, gave Gaara a thumbs up with a blinding nice guy smile and took off down the opposite hall shouting about youth. Nel's voice immediately joined in.

Gaara's eyes wandered aimlessly as his thoughts slowly cycled back into place. Timidly licking at the lingering taste of her lips, he slowly sat back down on the cot and settled his gaze on the floor.

"It seems she is right that I haven't recovered enough. My knees are still weak."

Hinata bit back a frustrated grunt as she failed to lift Naruto for the eighth time. It had taken time for her to convince him he wasn't hallucinating, that she was alright. It scared her, how hopeless and hurt he had looked. Him passing out next to her almost seemed like a blessing - until she noticed the blackened stubs that remained of his legs and hand. Tears had masked a feverish sweat as his breathing became more shallow with each passing cycle.

A potent surge of adrenaline had filled her veins when she realized no demonic energy radiated off or within him.

That was minutes ago and the temporary strength had been weighed down by her exhaustion. She had managed to pull him out of the hole they were in, but couldn't go any further. Allen was silent. Her body had nothing left. Naruto wouldn't wake up, and even her cries for help went unanswered.

His life depended on her… and she was helpless.

No! I can't think like that. There is a life for us, a future. I have to find the strength. If I can't stand, I'll crawl. If I can't crawl, I'll use my chin to drag us both. There isn't anyway I can give up. I won't give up!

She pulled his arm over her shoulder and fought to get her footing. The broken bones in her arms had barely healed enough to stay together and an audible cracking sound reached her ears as she struggled to hold him up. Her legs shook so badly her knees kept falling back to the ground. They wouldn't let her stand.

"Here, let me help."

A tall man dressed in Shinigami garb picked up Naruto and placed the blonde over his back. Holding out a hand, he helped Hinata to her feet with a handsome smile. His skin carried a light tan, deepened by the setting sun. The tips of his messy neck-length hair brushed the stubble on his face as he helped her to her feet.

"Thank you."

"Do you need me to carry you as well? You look rather tired."

"I'll be fine. Naruto-kun is the one who needs help."

"He'll be okay." The man glanced back over his shoulder. "This one's got a strong life force. I can tell."

"We should still hurry."

"You can't move very fast and I would be a poor gentlemen indeed to leave a lady alone." The man gave a reassuring grin. "Besides,

rushing won't make his legs grow back any faster." He chuckled awkwardly and lightly rapped his knuckles against his head. "Sorry, it has been a while since I have been around someone who needed reassurance. I'm a little out of practice."

"That's -fine."

He started walking forward, never getting more than an arm's reach from her. The few times she wobbled, his hand gently reached out and caught her arm until she regained her balance.

"My name is Adam. What is yours?"

"Hinata."

"A beautiful name, as beautiful as the woman it graces." He gave another awkward laugh and smacked his head again. "I am truly sorry. I really am out of practice talking to people. Whether it is true or not, something so syrupy only serves to make me sound foolish."

"It's alright" He helped pull her up onto a ledge. "Thank you."

"You are welcome, Hinata." Adam glanced down at her arms and then at the chipped pendant attached to a short band hanging loosely around her neck. "I've never seen a Zanpakuto be sealed into something other than a sword before."

"Really?" She reached up and grasped the silver disk. "I guess I haven't had time to think about it. It is strange that he didn't revert back to his original katana form."

"It is an oddity." He let her hands drop and started off again. "It compliments that unique energy of yours."

She blinked for a moment as a memory rapidly played out through her mind.

"Unique?"

"I have met very few people who draw upon nature for energy. Yours is more serpentine than others and carries a heavy quality, but it is of nature at its core."

"You know a lot about my energy."

"As I said, I can tell."

"Can you tell me why it is of interest to you then?" Her muscles coiled, ready to lash out at an instant's notice. "You've mentioned it several times, Millennium Earl."

Adam sighed and slowly rested Naruto out on the ground. Straightening up, he dusted himself off and faced her with a small sad smile. With his hands up in a placating manner, he stepped away from the unconscious blonde so she could move between them.

"You are sharp, my dear. Ah, and I was hoping I wouldn't slip up so early in our conversation. At least, it would have been nice to keep embarrassing myself a little longer to distract you from your worries."

He jabbed a thumb at Naruto.

"You tried to kill us and now you're helping us. Why?"

"I have such intense hatred for that spirit ally of yours, I momentarily delved into insanity. While I did wish to test your strength, I never wanted to hurt you. You are too precious, too important, for me to see you seriously harmed." He dropped his hands back to his sides and clenched them into fists. "I am ashamed and I am sorry."

The pure sincerity in his voice and guilt on his face stunned her. Gone was the mocking speech or childish inflection. This man, outside of the drastic physical changes, radiated none of the malignant aura that continually seeped out of the Earl. He was normal, excessively courteous and more than a little odd, but normal.

It meant the other form was a costume or armor like she thought which made him vulnerable right now. Did she have enough strength left to close the distance and deliver a fatal blow? The fact he stood so relaxed and unguarded could be carelessness, but more likely, the Earl had no fear of her right now. So either he underestimated her willingness to strike - or she didn't pose a threat. Yes, it'd be a mistake to assume the suit housed all of his power.

"I don't understand. If you are going to kill us, why does it matter how?"

I really need to watch what habits I pick up from Naruto. The Earl hasn't killed us so I shouldn't be provoking him.

"I hope I don't have to kill you, Hinata. I'm not even sure I want to kill Naruto. The hope of so many future lives depends on you." Adam clasped his hands behind his back and rolled on and off his heels. "There is so much history, so many hidden truths you must learn about. I really wish I had the time to explain it all to you now, but it will have to wait."

"You aren't making any sense."

"This world cannot be saved. Not by the great Sage, not by Innocence, and not by you or the Shinigami. I tried to save it for a lifetime. I even tried to save humanity once. It never changes in the end though. Humanity is a corruption and it has tainted everything, every creature, every gust of wind, every blade of grass. It is time to start from scratch." A swirling portal of dark purple appeared behind him and his eyes took on a harder glint. "There are no more second chances for me. Either I succeed this time or I die in the process. The question you must answer soon is whether you want to become the embodiment of hope or the corpse of broken dreams."

He hopped into the rift as the last traces of the sun disappeared behind the city walls. Hinata shivered as the coolness of the night cradled her and Karin's shouts echoed across the ruined streets.

Ichigo leaned against the closest wall as Yamamoto took his spot at the front of the captains. It was impressive, seeing every available captain lined up with their lieutenants behind them. An invisible unease permeated the air, behind self-comforting smiles and scowls. Some seemed to be taking the days events in stride while others teetered between anger and dread.

Lee crouched on the ground near him, dropping into various stretches every few seconds. Plain bandages were tied around his hands and feet, but he moved like they were completely unharmed. He looked more invigorated than before, which should have been impossible.

Nel sat beside the taijutsu user, waving frantically at Yachiru. The pink haired girl returned the gesture with equal intensity.

Ichigo blinked as Uryu, Chad, and Rukia came up silently and took a place next to him. Last he had heard, they were off training and weren't supposed to be interrupted for any reason.

"Where are Naruto and Hinata Uzumaki?" Yamamoto questioned harshly. "This matter concerns them as well."

"They were found less than an hour ago and are still recovering." Gaara bowed his head politely. "I will be sure to relay everything to them."

Ichigo frowned as the grip on his bicep tightened. Hinata had explained what happened during her confrontation and what Naruto had told her about some explosion that messed up his legs. Unohana herself had needed to handle him and fix the damage. Hinata was holding strong, but seemed bothered that Naruto hadn't healed up on his own. Apparently, that was usually the case.

Would things have been different if he hadn't been covering for me? How much time and energy did he burn trying to be everywhere at once?

The old man grunted and reached into his haori, pulling out a faded book.

"Before I get to this, I will talk about the light that consumed Seireitei. I have confirmed with both the three who were training underground and the Twelfth Division technicians that the light permeated every corner of the city and temporarily purged every trace of darkness and shadow."

"He put together all this fun for a night light?" The giant, Kenpachi Zaraki, gave a barking laugh, causing the bells in his hair to chime. "What the hell would he come up with for a cup of sugar?"

"By destroying the shadows, he effectively removed the realm of the Quincy Empire from existence."

"Quincy Empire?" Uryu shifted against the wall and braced his foot. "That hasn't existed in over a thousand years and that's if it is anything more than a legend."

"It was indeed real. The founding of the Gotei 13 was in direct response to the calamity brought about by Yhwach and his minions. That, however, is a conversation for another time. For now, understand that the reemergence of Yhwach and his empire would have unleashed even more chaos in this already difficult time."

"I don't see how difficult this battle was." Kenpachi rolled his neck around.

"Indeed, Aizen's mass forces fell quite easily." Byakuya Kuchiki remained regal even as he gave a nod of agreement. "While the Espada and Aizen himself my be significantly more powerful, three of the Arrancar and the traitor Tosen are already dead. Unless they drastically outclass even our strongest captains, we have the advantage in numbers."

"We had the advantage or did you not notice the two beings who accompanied Aizen's party?" Mayuri picked at his ear with a long

fingernail. "My scanners detected that the portly one was the stronger of the two. The other's destruction was responsible for that crater in the Third Division's courtyard. Our two recovering absentees are both captain level, and they both barely survived."

Ichigo swallowed a lump in his throat as the hair stood on the back of his neck. He might be stronger than Naruto in terms of brute force, but his trainer still won every sparring match. After everything he'd seen the blonde do, the concept of barely surviving, especially with how strong Naruto claimed Hinata was, it didn't compute. Sure, Hinata had said it. He believed her. But hearing it so factually, that they were simply outclassed, it made it sound hopeless in a way. It added a weight to the Earl that they didn't suspect before.

It meant the Earl ranked up alongside Aizen.

"I wouldn't mind having a crack at a guy like that." Zaraki's hand twitched like it was trying to find a sword to hold. "It might even be fun to have a fight with those two."

"You wouldn't like how Naruto fights." Ichigo moved to the end of the line between the two rows of captains. "I've sparred with Naruto enough to know he makes up for any lack of power, as rare as that is, with unpredictability. Hinata wouldn't tell me so I'll ask you. They didn't even harm the Earl did they?"

The room fell completely silent as the Commander grunted out an acknowledgement. Ichigo hoped his face didn't look quite as horrified as he felt.

"The creature, or man, is known as the Earl of the Millennium. He is a harbinger of destruction, having been at the heart of most calamities since the beginning." Yamamoto rested the journal down on his lap and placed his calloused hand over it. "Soul Society came into existence seven thousand years ago with the near destruction of the human world at the hands of the Earl. During this time, a man from another world, the same world Gaara no Suna and the others arrived from, came to the unshaped ether of souls and spiritual

energy. He brought form to Soul Society through the centuries and trained powerful souls into Shinigami that could derive order from the chaos. The man who wrote this journal was the very first Shinigami and my father, Shigeru Yamamoto."

Ichigo spotted Lee looking at his bandaged arms.

"Throughout this time, the Originator battled with the Earl and his forces. Before the final conflict that would end his life, the Originator left my father a warning of the Earl's return along with specific instructions. Specific names, who upon death, were to be collected exclusively by the Spirit King's royal guard and offered the opportunity to become artificial Zanpakuto. These Zanpakuto were to be placed under the Gotei Commander's care until those from another world came to wield them."

"That is a rather complicated process." Byakuya's scarf shifted as a light breeze flittered through the hall. "Surely preparing the Gotei 13 for this creature's arrival would have been more efficient."

"The spirits who reside in the artificial Zanpakuto are not only powerful, but also are an elite few who have history and invaluable experience dealing with the Earl. Pairing them with an already experienced Shinigami would prevent any resonance from occurring. The spirits needed to be partnered with individuals with potent reiatsu, and unlike Quincy, who could connect with Zanpakuto. Only a handful of individuals meet that criteria on this side. This other world provided thousands of candidates whose skill sets could blend seamlessly with the artificial spirits."

"And you have found them?"

"Yes, all four of the special Zanpakuto have been claimed and the results speak for the effectiveness you doubted."

"And yet, they lost against the Earl himself."

Yamamoto's eyes closed.

"We were unprepared for the Earl to be involved with Aizen. I never suspected-"

"Isn't that the understatement of a lifetime."

Ichigo whirled around as Naruto entered with Hinata beside him. The expression in his face was indescribable. It was the look of a man barely holding it together, like the slightest push could unravel him. Any greeting died on Ichigo's lips when Hinata motioned for him to stay silent.

"Glad to see you have arrived, Naruto Uzumaki."

"Bite me." Naruto brushed past Gaara's attempt to stop him as the ninja came right up in front of Yamamoto. "You actually had knowledge of that bastard and you held it back."

"The Earl was a horror story my father used to tell me when I misbehaved as a child. While I was aware of the journal and some of its contents, I remained skeptical of it until all of the artificial Zanpakuto were claimed. I am not one who believes that fate or prophecy is absolute." The old man climbed to his feet so his glare leveled with Naruto's. "Do not blame me for your refusal to share knowledge of his existence."

"He found us. The Zanpakuto were made for us. We figured he was our problem not yours and not the rest of the Shinigami."

"You are a Shinigami, Naruto Uzumaki."

"No! I am not one of you. I am not a part of your forces. I am not here to help you with Aizen or Arrancar or whatever other problems you've got. The only thing I want is to make sure my loved ones are safe, and with what I saw today, that ain't happening if we're here." Naruto flicked the strange kunai out from his sleeve and flung the point into the ground. "You can take the warning and burn it."

"Do you think the Earl will leave you be?" Yamamoto bent down and pulled the Zanpakuto from the floor. "Do you think you are immune to whatever tragedy he and Aizen will enact?"

"All I think is that I spent all day pulling your guys' asses out of the fire and it almost cost me everything."

Naruto turned his back to the Commander and stormed out of the hall. Everyone exchanged looks as Hinata approached the aged Shinigami and offered a bow.

"Please forgive him. I will calm him down."

"He is acting purely on emotions."

"Yes. He doesn't understand how to handle the fear of losing something."

"He has never felt fear?"

"He has never had anything to lose." Hinata reached out and gently took the kunai from Yamamoto. "Naruto will come through despite what he says. It's just not in him to ignore people in need."

"Very well. I shall leave him to you." She went to leave and he caught her arm, handing her a headband. "Aizen gave this to me. He said you would know what it was."

The clear night air hit Naruto's face, soothing his skin while failing to relax his emotions. His stomach was so twisted he couldn't tell whether what he just did made him feel better or worse. Yamamoto's reveal hadn't changed what he set out to do. It only provided a good excuse to build from. Knowing, not knowing, the Earl would have trounced them either way.

"Naruto-kun, wait." Hinata grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around to face her. "Naruto, I know you're a afraid-"

"Afraid?" Naruto laughed in disbelief and moved backward. "Hinata, I'm terrified."

"Of the Earl?"

"Of letting you die again!" Naruto ran his hands through his hair in a miserable attempt to calm himself down. He would not yell at Hinata. She had been through enough today. "If I am here, I will get involved. I'll put you and Lee and Gaara in harms way again. I'll let you guys take the damage so everyone else can get away safely. I can't do it."

"Naruto, I'm oka-"

"You weren't. It was like that time you were crumpled by that monster all over again. It was like what I felt in Madara's tower all over again. Sure, your healing abilities and Zanpakuto saved you this time. What about next time?"

He rubbed his face as the images of her flashed in front of him again. No matter how much she talked and moved, or he held her, those damn images filled his head. Every time he blinked, or she rested in a particular pose, it was like reliving the moment all over again.

"You'll be there." She tried to smile at him. "You always come through in the end."

"No. No, I haven't. I couldn't save Sasuke or Sakura or Lee or Kakashi. I let you die twice. Hell, once I killed you myself! I have put the mission and my responsibilities ahead every single time since my training with Jiraiya. My parents did the same thing. Do you have any idea how big of a hypocrite I feel like? Knowing how much I hated what they did, how they always put me last, and I end up doing the same damn thing!"

It made all the terrible feelings he'd long since buried claw their way to the surface. Jinchuriki meant human sacrifice. His childhood was sacrificed, his friends were sacrificed, he was sacrificed. He wouldn't

do that anymore. He couldn't be the last one standing again. He couldn't be alone again.

"Naruto, we can't turn our back on everyone. The Earl and Aizen, we might be the only ones who can stop them." She pulled out a bloody Konoha headband as droplets slid down her cheeks. "Naruto, they've found our ho-me."

Her voice broke with the final word as emotions strangled her. A cold chill ran up his back, but he angrily suppressed it.

"I don't care."

"Naruto!"

"You are the only person I love, Hinata, and I won't put you in harms way anymore. I've failed too many times to save people I care about. I won't make another mistake. This time, someone else needs to take the lead."

An evening breeze cut around them as she hugged the headband to her chest and her face tightened like she refused to believe what he said.

He swallowed the nausea down as it coated the back of his throat. Every part of him rejected the crap coming out of his mouth. Every syllable a bitter lie. It hurt him at his very core, but there was no choice. The battle with Danzo made him realize the limitations of a leader, but he'd thought by not being Hokage, by being like Jiraiya instead, he would never be put in that situation again. He could act independently and would never have to sacrifice someone. The fight with Madara changed that. Madara made him understand that sometimes nothing was ever enough. He couldn't be everywhere at once. No matter how strong he was, there would be opponents he couldn't defeat fast enough to rescue someone else. He wouldn't always save everyone.

There were limits that could only be passed by sacrificing a life and this war would call for a lot of lives. It already had. And because of who they were and what they could do, his friends would take on the biggest risks. They would be the ones called upon when it got bad - like they were today. Hinata would face the Earl again. The only way to keep her safe, to make sure she wasn't sacrificed again, was to betray everything he believed in and every single person who counted on him. He'd find a way to live with himself as long as she didn't get hurt anymore.

"What if I put myself in harm's way?" Her voice was so soft it would have been lost in the night if it wasn't so firm.

"What?"

"You have said almost nothing since you woke up. Supportive? Yes. Loving? Certainly. But, you never shared what was going on in your head until all of this. You made the decision to leave Seireitei and not fight. I- I haven't… and I won't."

"Hinata, don't-"

"I'm staying to fight, Naruto." She approached him slowly as pure compassion radiated off movement. "I've been lucky. I never have had to see you dead or seen you so badly hurt I never thought you wouldn't recover. I can't imagine how painful or terrifying that must be and I don't blame you for feeling this way."

She pressed her hand against the whisker marks of his cheeks and he grasped it as tears began to trickle out of the corners of his eyes.

"I'm never there when it counts. Sakura, Jiraiya, you all died because I wasn't there. It's all my fault."

"No, no nothing is. You have overcome so much and you have done so much. Please, don't let yourself be consumed with grief. Don't lose yourself in guilt that shouldn't exist." She wrapped her arms

around his neck and pulled his forehead down to hers. "I love you, Naruto. So please, please, let all that pain go."

His hands gripped her shoulders and he lightly pushed her away. He needed to smile and put her at ease, to let her know it would be okay. All his lips had to do was turn up. He could say she put everything in perspective like always. That he felt better and gained more determined than ever.

Just smile damn it!

He couldn't. Everything felt so scrambled and puncturing; he had no clue how to feel. He wasn't simply being angry or scared or sad or anything. It was all a big stinging sludge coating him inside. None of that mattered if he just smiled.

Instead, he pulled the kunai from her belt and sheathed it under his sleeve.

"Naruto?"

"I better start training."

He rocketed away from her in a Shunshin and took off along the rooftops. His feeling going haywire wouldn't stop Hinata from doing the right thing and she knew he wouldn't sit it out either. She knew he wouldn't ignore something in front of him. It was why he wanted to run, and why she wouldn't let him. It didn't change the fact they couldn't do anything right now. The Earl, Aizen, all of them outclassed them. That couldn't be changed, but he could make sure she survived along with everyone else.

"Kyo, let me in the mindscape."

The world faded away and he landed on the dusty battlefield in front of the samurai. The taller man scowled and folded his arms across his armored chest.

"I don't appreciate being tossed aside, punk."

"Shut up." Naruto walked up closer as he repressed every urge to pummel his companion spirit. "You keep telling me all this crap, but so far, I haven't seen you be anything but a burden."

"I'm helping you."

"How? You block my demonic energy so I can't heal. I couldn't make a clone. Hinata almost died because you've decide to keep my power on lockdown."

"I knew she would be fine. You would have too if you hadn't traded your balls for a pu-"

Naruto slugged him across the face so hard he wasn't sure whether it was his knuckles or the spirit's jaw that cracked. Kyo rolled to his knees and Naruto kicked him square in the face.

"This is how our agreement is going to work. You give me my power when I want it or I shatter that crappy dagger and toss the remains in a pit to rust."

Kyo lunged for him, the shoulder charge knocking the wind out of him and sending him crashing on his back.

"Don't make threats you can't keep, runt!" Kyo stomped down on Naruto's chest. "I get your woman was in trouble. I get you feel powerless. Instead of soiling your pants, how about you man up and actually win for once."

He stomped again, Naruto catching his foot and pushing him off.

"You want me to win?" Naruto crawled to his feet and spit into the dirt. "Then get out of my way."

"I'm not in your way. I'm helping you."

"You're just holding back my power. The wind element, the sage mode, all of it, you're intentionally holding back parts of it so you can feel useful. The reality is you're some dumbass that got suckered into being sword for no good reaso-"

Kyo was on him in a flash, his katana biting through the first layer of skin on Naruto's neck. Crimson had taken over his entire eye and the pupil had transformed into a golden star. Bloodlust and rage swept out over the field as Kyo pressed the blade slightly harder.

"I've spent centuries trapped in here waiting for a chance to get at the Earl. I gave up my chance to move on. You're scared of losing your girl? I haven't seen my Yuya since that fat bastard took her soul. I will not miss my opportunity to get her back because you've got abandonment issues!"

"Then let me fight with the Kyubi's power so I can use the attack that killed Madara you useless piece of sh-"

The air thundered with an earsplitting crack as shards of the stained glass sky rained down on them. Naruto's head whipped up as a familiar burning sensation churned in his belly. Four black slashes marred the eternal sunset color and a large familiar eye appeared from behind the sky.

"Ah, now there is a familiar face." The bestial growl echoed across the landscape, amusement dripping off every sound. "Although, I never expected to see you speechless."

Kyo ran his gloved palm down his face.

"Great, the furball's awake again."

Naruto's mouth ran dry.

"Kyu- Kyubi?"

It started low, like far off thunder, slowly growing as a storm closed in until it unleashed all its ferocious noise overhead. It was a frightening booming rumble that inspired dread in the blonde's heart.

The nine tailed demon fox, king of the biju, was alive.

And he was laughing.

END SECTION ONE

Author's Notes:

Wow, so about getting Section One done quickly… yikes. It has been one hell of a month for me, mix in a lot of scene tweaking, and this chapter took a lot of time. This was a tricky chapter, and admittedly, one that made me a little wary. I needed to show Naruto's vulnerabilities in a realistic manner that stayed true to the character. I do think him doing it to protect Hinata and hating himself for it provided that, and I think her calling him on that (and understanding he's never had something to lose) cemented the development in a believable light.

I also hope I included enough humor/positive throughout the rest of the scenes so that the chapter as a whole didn't wander into angst territory.

Anyway, this concludes section one. It's been a slow boil up until this point, but the stage is set, the lines drawn, now for all hell to break loose.

Starting with our dearly revived fox.

Charred

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 13

"You see why I wanted you to calm down yet?" Kyo frowned and rested his nodachi over his shoulder. "I've been using my power to hold the ass-licker back from taking over your soul."

"I resent that assumption. As a demon, I do not have the same hygiene requirements as my mortal ilk."

"Do you think I care?"

"I simply felt it required clarification. You wouldn't like it if I suggested you threw your waste around like a common ape."

"How is that even the same-"

"How are you still alive, Kyubi?" Naruto's voice cut through their banter with an uncharacteristic calm. "Why haven't you appeared until now?"

"Done wetting ourselves are we?" The fox's head shifted so a few teeth glimmered amidst the black. "Have you forgotten, Naruto? I warned you I would find a way to survive."

The image of the great beast dying flashed in his mind's eye. The last of its strength combining with the half already inside the seal as fur and flesh faded to dust.

"You said your spirit might hitch a ride with the yang chakra. That should have been as impossible as - as-"

"You becoming our world's strongest ninja and killing Madara?"

Naruto scratched at his hair and turned his attention to Kyo.

"You knew about him?"

"He'd stayed dormant until you drew on his power during our first meeting. Because none of our spirits are separated by a seal, I've had to actively prevent you from pulling the demonic reiryoku. Otherwise, the fox would break through my barrier up there and take over. The more active you've been, and the more you've needed to heal, the weaker the barrier gets."

"Which is why you couldn't risk healing me instantly." Naruto lifted his shirt and peered down at his belly. "I've got paper seals working. I could build another one to contain him."

"Don't think you'll get me in your little stomach cage again, boy!"

More of the sky shards fell loose with the quaking roar.

"He's not wrong." Kyo dismissed his katana into the ether and flicked the debris from his wild hair. "Things don't segment in a soul the same way as a human body."

"I'm still pulling from his energy in a different place than mine."

"You're getting it directly from him. The demonic energy reattached itself to him when his spirit manifested in this mindscape." Kyo folded his arms across his chest. "I forget you don't catch on quickly so let me lay it out nice and simple. By drawing on his energy, you're dragging him through my barrier. Even if you make a seal like your old one, it wouldn't be… physical like before. It would merely be your energy holding back his. Every time you get tired or he decides to slam against it, the seal will weaken no different from mine."

"Is there any way you can modify your barrier to let me siphon his power?"

"I really feel like I should be included in this conversation." The fox snorted and scratched at one of the slashes in the ceiling.

"He's constantly putting pressure on it. The more gaps, the greater the chance of it causing cracks, like a dam holding back a raging river."

"So, I either don't use his power or he takes over?"

"Pretty much."

"You could always try consuming me instead." Naruto and Kyo both looked up at the beast with disbelieving glares. "What? You thought I was the only one who could take over? The roles work both ways, boy. Like with our freeloading samurai here, all our powers are housed in one little soul, but only one spirit gets to be in charge."

"You want me to eat you?"

The fox laughed again and a large chunk of the barrier fell away, revealing half of Kyubi's face.

"I missed your simple mind. No fool, eating is how I prefer to consume your power. The same thing could be accomplished by crushing me and taking my power for yourself. How about it, Naruto? Didn't you say you wanted to defeat the real nine-tailed demon?"

Naruto clenched his teeth and stretched out his hand. It'd only taken one major strike the first time. The fox had its full power now so it probably wouldn't be so simple. He could make his Rasenshuriken bigger this time, which should nullify the difference.

"Not yet." Kyo clamped a hand down on Naruto's wrist. "You're still recovering from today. Wait until you can fight at full power."

"Full power, half power, you're dead either way, Naru-"

The sky snapped shut, cutting off the Kyubi's taunt. Naruto shrugged off Kyo's grip with a scowl. He knew the red-eyed man was right. He

needed a night to let everything settle, physically and emotionally. Running around in a panic, getting reckless, would only cause more problems. He needed to protect Hinata and that wouldn't happen if he jumped the gun. Just because she came first from now on, didn't mean he could ignore everything Jiraiya taught him. No, it mattered more than ever that he stayed observant.

"Finally let his guard down enough I could seal him back up, yapping sack of fur." Kyo frowned and refocused on Naruto. "You calm down yet?"

"Don't worry about me."

"I kind of have to."

"Just make sure there aren't any more hold ups after I beat Kyubi." Naruto's eyes hardened into a harsh glare. "I want my full power the instant I need it. No more excuses."

The darkened patches soiled the blue cloth as gouges marred the once polished leaf in the center of the headband. Had it belonged to a friend or loved one? Hanabi would be about eighteen now and probably a jonin. For all she knew, this could be her younger sister's. Although it likely wasn't, the fact a ninja item fell into Aizen's hands complicated an already migraine inducing situation. If Aizen had this, it meant his forces found a way to their world. Was Konoha fighting an invasion or was this a trap designed to pull them away from this war?

I don't care.

She didn't believe Naruto's words for a second. Naruto Uzumaki not caring about his village, about anyone suffering, was as likely as water being dry. No, he cared. He may not want to, but he did. The problem was he cared about her even more and had convinced himself he needed to choose between the two. Call it cowardice, or maturity, or acceptance, but dying stole the absolute confidence he

once radiated. And right now, they needed that stubborn, borderline stupid resolve.

She needed it.

It wasn't fair of her to want that. He'd supported her both indirectly and directly in their past life. While the world fell apart and others suffocated under hopelessness, he always kept faith and cheered everyone on. He carried it all on his shoulders, and right now, he couldn't in his current distress. It should be okay. He should be allowed to be human. This time, it was supposed to be her turn to support him and hold him up as he had her. Sure, she listened and encouraged. She pushed and forced when really necessary, like saying she would fight in spite of her own reservations. It wasn't enough though. Nothing she did snapped him back to the person who overcame the impossible.

She was failing him.

The dirt scuffed from the other side of the wall. He'd been standing over there for nearly an hour. Her thoughts could wait until after she put him at ease.

"You can come out of hiding, Ichigo-kun." Hinata wiped her face dry with her sleeve and tucked away the forehead protector. "You don't need to stand around all night listening to me cry."

Ichigo came around from the other side of the wall and approached the stone bench she sat on. His face scrunched up into an awkward frown, like the teen didn't really know what to do. Obviously, he wanted to make sure she was okay, hence his presence, but he looked very uncomfortable about it.

"I- uh, you okay?" Ichigo growled and rubbed at his face. "Sorry, I don't deal well with people crying - brings up bad memories."

"Thank you for checking up on me. I'm okay."

"That's good." He twisted his head away and scratched at his chin. "Listen, I wanted to say I'm sorry. Naruto being like this. I kind of feel like it's my fault. He spent a lot of energy helping me and - and I guess… sorry."

"Naruto helped everyone, not just you."

"I still feel like I let him down. He could have launched his attack to close the Garganta from a hundred different places, but instead, he chose to do it where he would draw Aizen into a trap and back me up. It's about as far from where you were fighting as you could get while still being inside the city."

"You're important to him, Ichigo." Hinata fiddled with the repaired pendant around her neck. "I know you don't think of yourselves as teacher and student, but the way he gets so excited about your progress, it reminds me of how his sensei used to act when he'd come bother Tsunade-sama."

Ichigo rubbed the back of his head as he failed to hide a smile.

"Because of him, I'm starting to understand my power and how to really use it. He's the best teacher I have ever had. I won't tell him that though." His smile became softer as his eyes replayed memories before him. "But Hinata, the way he talks about you. There's something in his words more than praise. They have this… weight behind them. It's like how my Dad talks about Mom during the rare times when he's actually serious."

His hands fisted as a grimace replaced the smile.

"Hinata, when Mom die- when she was killed, it destroyed him and my sisters. Hell, it destroyed all of us. He played it strong, burying everything so he could make us smile. It took something out of him and put something heavier in its place. I don't know what happened today or what you and Naruto talked about, but I don't want to see that happen again, to either of you."

He paused for a beat, then spun around and took off in a run.

"Where are you going?"

"Training, I need to get strong enough Naruto doesn't have to cover for me. That way he can fight with you and the two of you together can kick this Earl guy's ass."

He disappeared down a flight of stairs.

She tilted her head to the side with an amused smile.

Entirely different worlds, and yet, so scarily similar.

"They're both right." She gazed down at the pendant. "I've been so focused on training my eyes. I haven't reclaimed the ability to manipulate my energy into the density required for the Hyuga's ultimate techniques, and I never truly mastered it before. And you too, Allen-san, I don't think we've scratched the surface of what we can do if we combine our powers. Are you recovered enough to get to work?"

The pendant flashed and Hinata headed deeper into the night.

Adam.

Wake up, Adam.

Slowly opening his hazel eyes, ice blue irises stared down at him as smooth midnight hair cascaded down the sides of her thin face and around his head. She grinned at him and tilted her lips down toward his.

And a fierce yawn escaped his mouth.

She blinked and sputtered before rolling onto her back and breaking out into boisterous laughter, hugging her ribs as she kicked at the fur

blanket draped over them. It was an entirely unladylike laugh, uproarious and without a semblance of grace.

He loved that laugh.

"You have to be the unsexiest man in this world, Adam."

He yawned again and quickly twisted to his side, hugging her into him.

"I must have some redeeming value to make you a mother of three." She laughed harder and he sat up with a exasperated sigh. "You're too cruel, Ileana."

She tilted her head back, sporting a wicked grin.

"If I tease you enough, I'll eventually end up as a mother of four."

He sighed again and reached for his cloak. The cold months were gradually settling in, leaving the mornings cold and covered with frost. They needed to sleep with layers and keep fires lit constantly. Still, he considered it a blessing. It was a part of nature, the world crafted by God.

Tying the cloak over his shoulders he exited the small hut, the frozen blades of grass crunching under his boots. The commune was already busy as the hunters brought in the morning kill and vegetables boiled in pots over the many fires dotting the circle of shacks.

"Is mother teasing you again?" A young man with similar features to himself sharpened a sword by their family's fire. "As leader, you really shouldn't let her embarrass you so much."

Adam poked his son in the forehead repeatedly.

"And what kind of leader should take advice from a toddler?"

The boy smacked his forehead against Adams with a growl.

"Call me a toddler again, old man, and we'll have a new chief!"

"Oh really?" Adam disarmed his son in an instant and held it under the younger's chin. "Keep working your reflexes and you might."

The boy pouted and looked away.

"You still shouldn't let her make fun of you."

"She's full of life and happiness. While it is no mistake she is masterful at toying with all of us, she comes from a place of love."

"Then why does she behave the same with our enemies?"

"Oh she certainly does not behave in the same manner. All you must do is see her eyes and hear the light leave her laughs to understand it holds no love."

"Then why?"

"Because boy, laughter is more menacing than a war cry."

He stepped away and joined the hunters in their circle as they prepared the meat. Scowls adorned a few faces as a somber mood hung in the air. The lack of bravado and laughter told him all he needed to know.

"Which village this time?"

"The clan at the far edge of the valley to the east. They stampeded right over them." The burly woman took a swig from her flask and went back to work cleaning out the beast. "That puts the Mino army two days from the next settlement and ten days from us. All the clans between us and them are already begging for protection."

"Of course we will help."

"Please don't take this as disrespect, but not all of us are warriors chosen by God, Adam."

"I understand your trepidation. However, it is our responsibility to help those in need and protect the weak from the predator's who would harm them. Try not to worry; we shouldn't have to engage them directly if we cave in the sides of the valley."

"That's a tall order for two days, even with the entire clan and your powers."

"Blocking the march through the valley will force them to go around the mountain ranges on either side. Winter could strike at any time, either killing them outright should they attempt the journey or forcing them to dig in until spring."

"What do we do come spring should they have half a brain to wait?"

Adam smiled warmly and pressed his hand against the cold soil. A warm green glow enveloped his palm and the seed he sensed within the earth surfaced and stretched up a few inches into a tiny sapling.

"By spring, lush forests will have closed off our peninsula and force anyone wishing to enter to come by foot or sea. God makes the waters far too turbulent for anything more than fishing close to shore, and on foot - well, can anyone stand against us, my friends?"

Adam glanced behind him over the edge of the cliff. Hundreds of tents and hutches filled the field below as men and women fixed weapons and tools alike. Friends and family, every single one, his village of warriors and farmers. They were blessed with being strong and well fed. Extending the same gifts to others was the right thing to do.

He knew the Mino army caused them worry, but there was no need to horde their gifts to themselves. He gave his word he would protect them from harm, and he never went back on his word.

The Earl slowly awoke as the last sensations of his memories faded away into consciousness. It had been a long time since he remembered that dream. How many millennia was it now? They all

blended into each other so much after a while. Perhaps, it was due to that girl standing defiantly in front of him with the same fierce expression as Ileana.

"It breaks my heart, seeing such foolish young children repeat all my many mistakes."

Minato stirred awake as a soft clunk occurred right by his face. Sitting up with a groggy groan, the comforting aroma of a steaming breakfast filled his nose. Kushina sat down across from him with another plateful.

"Have the kids already left for the academy?"

"An hour ago, you passed out a few minutes shy." She offered him one of her wary smiles. "It was actually their idea to let you sleep."

She'd been giving him those ever since he returned from Madara's tower. While it wasn't uncommon for her to put on a mask, that particular expression never came to the surface unless something really bothered her - something that involved their children.

"Are they okay?" Minato repositioned his meal closer. "I'm sure they can tell something is wrong, even if we haven't revealed what's going on."

She shook her had furiously.

"No, they're okay. Jiraiya has asked a few times why there is so much construction going on and why the ninja seem on edge. Tsunade probably suspects something, but is more upset they aren't allowed to go to the training grounds anymore without an adult and no one has time to."

"I'll do it when they get back today."

"Shikamaru-san has you running all over the nations prepping for doomsday. You've been to Kumo twice and all the other nations once in the past week and a half. You're surviving on catnaps and ration pills."

Minato stared down at his food and picked at it. He still wanted to in spite of her points. He knew they understood his responsibilities to the village came first. All ninja understood that. It didn't stop the tightening in his forehead as another migraine approached, the frustration and stress braiding together in an aching band around his skull. Years of peace made him believe things wouldn't be the same as with Naruto. He wouldn't have to choose between village and family again.

"Seriously Minato, eat. You look awful."

"And you look worried."

"We were told the world is ending."

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

She gently pulled at a lock of hair, her fist sliding down the strands to the tips. A slight tremble danced over her lips as her eyes cut to the floor.

"In the scroll from the toads, it mentioned a child of prophesy. Jiraiya-san told us about the Great Toad Sage's proclamation of a child who would change the world. Your teacher thought- he thought maybe…"

He watched as she struggled to keep the painful emotions from her face.

"Naruto could have been the child the Toad spoke of, especially since his actions with Madara and inspiring Pain's redemption brought the nations closer together. Of course, Jiraiya-sensei also said Pain, Nagato, was also potentially the child of prophesy."

He winced as soon as the words left his mouth and struck his wife like a whip.

"I know. Given Pain's abilities and Rinnegan, it makes more sense for it to be about him. I just, I can't help but hope - you know?"

"Kushina-"

"I don't want him to suffer like the Toad's warning said he would. Naruto's suffered enough for all of us a thousand times over."

"You think if he didn't lose hope, he'd win."

"Damn right I do!" She slammed her fist on the table hard enough both plates hopped. "He beat freaking Madara, the demon god. We being complete failures as parents didn't beat him. His years of loneliness and loss didn't beat him. Two guys and an army of invisible monsters wouldn't stand a chance in hell!"

Minato felt himself smile softly as she calmed back down. He loved that temper of hers. Pure spirit is what his Sensei used to call it. It wasn't petty or negative, just sheer honesty and heart. It had become so rare over the years.

"I just want for him to be alive again, Minato. He doesn't have to save us or even speak to us. I just want him to be alive and happy."

"I know you are not happy."

"Yeah, you could say that." Naruto huffed and folded his hands behind his head as he followed Gaara down the dirt road miles out from Seireitei. The sun barely hovered above the tree line, casting golden flickers among the trees. "How much has Hinata told you?"

"Are you referring to her fight with the Earl or your fear induced actions?"

"So everything."

He hadn't spoken to Hinata much since the meeting. Crap, only his apology to her could really be counted. He'd trained all night, the day's events and the revelation of the Kyubi being alive killed any chance of sleep anyway. Silence reigned over breakfast. Everyone kept their distance, trying to be understanding of his messed up headspace. Except Gaara, the moment breakfast ended, the ex-Kazekage came in and said the two of them were going on a trip.

They hadn't said a word to each other for over two hours until now.

"I find it difficult." Gaara kept walking ahead of Naruto even with the brief pause in his words. "To believe that this Earl is so powerful a single encounter has left you so terrified you'd forsake everything you believe in."

"You think I wanted to say that crap about not caring about the village?"

"Did you?"

"Of course not!"

"Then why say it?"

"It's complicated." Naruto's pace slowed to a trudge. "Honestly Gaara, what I'm feeling is all mixed up. Part of me wants to jump in headfirst, fight the Earl and Aizen, save our world and help the Shinigami, keep going until everyone is safe or I drop. It's the smaller part though. My loudest repeating thought is that I can't handle losing everyone again."

Naruto kicked a stray stone so it bounced off a tree and into a small stream.

"Determination is always enough. You are still the Kazekage."

"What?"

"Those are the words you said to me when my village crumbled under Danzo's forces." Gaara stopped and faced Naruto fully. "I lost my brother, my teacher, and so many ninja and civilians who looked to me to keep them safe. Despair and guilt threatened to unravel me, to the point I almost longed to return to the days before you showed me what it meant to have those to care for. Few can understand how painful it is for people like us, who had to fight every inch for someone to love us - to want us in their lives as friend and family. Losing that is something so painful; it makes you wish you never succeeded in gaining it in the first place. I was consumed by those feelings, but your words helped me overcome them."

Naruto felt his heart ache like it was reaching for something a paper's width from his fingertips. He had been so sure about his words back then and they once came as easy as breathing. He had believed in them completely. It should be so simple to grasp the spirit that made him surpass expectations and find a way to win. He wanted to be that man again. He wanted to dig himself out from all the failures and hardships that piled up on top of his chest and stand above it. So why did it seem so impossible?

"Determination is always enough. You are still Naruto Uzumaki and we still stand by you. You may not be able to save everyone, and knowing who you are, that has to be absolutely crushing. However, you need to ask yourself something, Naruto. While you have lost friends, how many more lives, how many more loved ones, would have died without your unwavering resolve to surpass what everyone accepted was inevitable?"

Naruto visibly shook as the question cut through his emotions. Was it really that cut and dry? He should be happy that he protected so many, that it justified his failures for the rest? No, Gaara wouldn't mean it that way. The redhead was trying to remind him his efforts didn't always end up badly. By giving his all, he beat so many odds. Everything worked out in most cases through luck or effort. Having strong opponents didn't mean he'd fail. Honestly, his head knew that. The chance that it could though is what froze him in his tracks.

And that's really what it came down to, didn't it? He lacked the balls to take the risks and brush off his issues anymore. The bitterness of being abandoned, the guilt over Sakura and Sasuke, the doubts about being able to get to his friends in time, the fear of losing Hinata, he used to bury all of it by zeroing in on every new threat that reared its ugly head. It was easy to focus on Danzo or Akatsuki or his responsibilities to Konoha. He never truly mourned for Sakura because he needed to save Lee from Sasuke. Then, reclaiming his powers and stopping Danzo made it easy to ignore any need to grieve for both of his fallen teammates. Akatsuki made a convenient excuse to avoid how he felt about his parents' return.

Sacrificing himself made it easy to fake forgiveness and be kind.

But now, all of that was staring him square in the face and he didn't have a freaking clue how to deal with it. His past had caught up with him and paralyzed him in the present. All he could see were failures. All he could think about was what he would lose.

Damn it, he'd become so pathetic!

"You need to stop thinking so much, Naruto." Gaara tore the sling off his arm and forced the shoulder to rotate a few cycles.

"Is your arm healed enough to be doing that?" A nervous sweat formed on the back of Naruto's neck as sand swirled violently out of Gaara's gourd. "Gaara?"

"We have been lax in our training. I have gotten too used to straight forward dueling and you must master your powers. It makes sense we should battle each other. Besides, we only fought once. I'd like to see if that was a fluke."

"Alright." Naruto flicked his Zanpakuto out from the holster on his forearm. "Sure the old fart won't get pissed one of his captains is fighting dirty?"

"He understands." Gaara unsheathed his dagger. "That we are Shinobi."

Sado wheezed as his back smashed painfully into the wall, forming another crater amongst a dozen others. Limply tumbling out of it, a sudden burst of freezing air quickly gave way to a raging heat. He tiredly peered past his sweat soaked bangs as his heaving chest scraped on the cracked ground. Rukia bounced and skid across the floor in front of him as flashes of light from Uryu's arrows lit up the vault's shadows. They pegged an empty floor, and with an ear-aching boom, the last Quincy crashed into the ground.

Struggling to climb to his knees, Sado cradled his right arm. Even with his powers active and the shield applied over it, every blow made it feel like the bones would break. While the shield had been cut by Nnoitra, he never felt pressure to his physical arm, let alone pain. This man who had been sent to speed up their training outclassed them all through sheer power and his new regimens were insane.

"Yosh, all of you did much better this time!" The man called Rock Lee gave them a thumbs up as his ruby red gauntlets glimmered. "Stand my friends, there is still much training to do. We have only accomplished the first three hours of sparring."

Uryu leapt up high and pulled back on the shiny silver bow in his hands. A blue arrow, far more detailed than anything Sado saw him use in the past, took shape and fired in a tunneling shockwave. Lee held up his hands and a shield of tightly compressed flame expanded from his palms, disintegrating the arrow.

"Uryu-kun, I understand being higher allows you to better see your environment." Lee vanished and reappeared behind the Quincy. "But it is easy to anticipate. You should try changing the angles from where you attack your opponent."

Uryu zipped away with his high speed movement technique, but Lee came up behind him again.

"You must also get used to fighting in close quarters, Uryu-kun."

"Blut: Arterie." Uryu swung his bow around, crashing into Lee's guard and knocking him back. "I can push reishi into my arteries to augment my physical power. It allows me to handle close quarters well enough."

Lee smiled broadly.

"I am glad to hear it. Kaimon Open!" In a blur, Lee closed the gap and swung his leg around in a burning kick. The veins in Uryu's body brightened, but his body caved under the force of the strike. Lee landed softly and stretched out his legs. "Let us take a small break. Two thousand pushups!"

The man's gauntlets and greaves transformed back into bandages as he fell into the exercise and furiously ripped through the repetitions. He'd already finished the first hundred before Rukia managed to sit up. None of them could argue Lee knew how to take training to its peak. Whether any of them would survive remained up for debate.

Sado went to work at the pushups. None of them had the luxury to be fatigued. The wreckage up above made it obvious future battles would require more strength and it didn't need to be said they were out of time. If this man from another world could bring out their maximum, then he would do what was asked without question.

However, he did have concerns about his personal growth. What Urahara put together had been working. His Brazo Derecha de Gigante, his power that Urahara had taken to calling a Fullbring, improved daily. For whatever reason however, he could not shake the feeling it hadn't become more… complete. It was strange, but ever since he originally gained the power it always felt like pieces of it were missing. No, missing wasn't correct. It felt more like

something needed to be added to it. When they arrived in Hueco Mundo, that feeling lessened significantly. Still, the sentiment lingered, and while what he did have strengthened, it didn't evolve further.

"Done! I shall now do handstand pushups until the rest of you finish."

"Is the Commander attempting to kill us by sending this person to complete our training?" Rukia winced as she rubbed the bruise on her cheek. "I understand the need to expedite our progress, but this seems reckless."

"From what Ichigo said, he awakened his Zanpakuto yesterday." Chad grunted as he finished his first hundred. "He's already using it to overpower yours."

"Yes, you are correct. He is exceptionally gifted at bonding with his weapon's spirit and its power is unique as well."

Sado watched Lee rapidly knock off rep after rep. Fed from his gauntlets and greaves, the flames never reached farther out in front of him than the range of a fist or kick. The shape changed depending on the movement, and like when he shielded himself from Uryu's arrow, it could expand to body length size. It just wouldn't expand outward, like an invisible wall prevented it from reaching forward, only augmenting his taijutsu, burning anything a strike touched or incinerating anything a block intercepted.

"Even with Blut: Vene, he almost ruptured my organs." Uryu dispelled his bow and dropped down next to them with a grimace. "I think I should be able to try more powerful techniques out on him though."

"I was thinking that as well." Rukia shook out an arm while holding the pushup position with the other. "He may not die if I unleash the true ability of Sode no Shirayuki."

Sado hoisted himself up to his feet, his Fullbring bubbling to life over his arms as he approached Lee. He didn't have any higher level techniques or something new to try. All he could do was master what he already possessed. It would be enough. It had to be. He'd let Ichigo's back be unguarded too long as it was.

Lee flipped to his feet

"Rise from Ash, Sokyoku."

"The name of your Zanpakuto. It's the same as a giant halberd once used for Shinigami executions." Rukia paused and looked up for a moment. "How did you come to posses that weapon?"

"That Zanpakuto was actually the last remains of my spirit's original weapon, Kikoo. Sokyoku was the nickname given to my spirit, Shigeru, because their individual powers were so great."

They can talk during the next rest.

"Are you ready, Lee?" Energy surrounded Sado's fist as the taijutsu-user nodded. Rearing back his arm the giant punched and the blast shot forward. "El Directo!"

Hinata sipped at the tea as Yamamoto kneeled across from her. While informal, and ultimately a business meeting, the Shinigami Commander's preparation and ritual flowed flawlessly. It brought a faint smile to her lips as memories of her family surfaced. Official tea ceremonies were the rare times her father praised her.

"You are familiar with this ceremony?"

"Yes."

"I do apologize for not making it more official."

"This is wonderful. I am thankful for you taking the time."

"Still, I hope you join us when our club has its next meeting."

"I would love to."

The tea calmed her down and soothed the lump that had been lodged in her throat since last night.

"Naruto is welcome to attend as well."

She almost sputtered and dumped her cup, but succeeded in remain poised.

"This is stricter than Naruto-kun would appreciate."

"I assumed as much." He folded his hands in his lap as she set the cup down. "I would like to speak with you about your Arrancar ward, Nel Tu."

The lump swelled to a nearly choking size.

"What about Nel?"

"During Aizen's invasion, I had Mayuri Kurotsuchi fully examine her to determine if she was a threat. I believe it is pertinent to disclose what he discovered."

"Please."

"I am not sure how much you understand about Hollows so I will give you a brief explanation. The beasts consume souls out of instinct to make up for the emptiness of their wretched existence. The more souls consumed the stronger and more intelligent a Hollow becomes until it reaches the point where only other Hollows can satiate its hunger. Over time, they become Menos Grande, and as they consume more souls, they reach higher levels of Menos. Failing to do so would have them permanently revert to mindless giants. What you must understand is all those souls they consume, both directly and from those eaten by other Hollows, do not die. Rather, the imprisoned become a continual source of energy. When we purify

them with a Zanpakuto, it is not merely the Hollow's soul, but the thousands upon millions of other souls captured within its belly."

Hinata fought against the urge to fidget.

"This changes when they become Arrancar."

"Yes. Kurotsuchi discovered that the Hogyoku utilizes the energy of the souls as a catalyst to transform the Hollow. The individual souls dissipate into nothingness as their power is completely transferred over to the host. It is why Arrancar are so much stronger than even a Vasto Lorde. It also stabilizes them which are why they do not feel compelled to feed on souls."

"So killing Nel will not release the souls once housed within her and she will not eat anymore souls."

"Correct. While it is unfortunate, even heartbreaking, so many souls have been snuffed out and forced to the other side; there is no need to eradicate her on the basis of what she is."

"And on the basis of who she is?"

"While it may be an elaborate ruse on Aizen's part, we surmised she classified as an outcast, and without her power, she is not a threat."

Hinata let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. Nel would be okay. Finally, some good news after the past day's events. Hopefully, this would bring a smile to everyone's faces.

"Thank goodness."

"We know of her past as the third Espada and Mayuri has devised a way for her to regain those powers. She could be a powerful ally with valuable knowledge or an enemy that would be put down. As a show of good faith, I am allowing the decision to fall to you. Do we let her remain as a child, who may likely grow as a normal soul, or do we accept the risks of reviving the third Espada?"

"She stays a child." Hinata held her gaze against Yamamoto's. "It may be an emotional decision, but I won't risk an innocent child's life. Right now, the only thing she threatens is Seireitei's supply of candy. I would like to keep it that way and let her have a chance of becoming powerful under the guidance of people who care about her."

Yamamoto closed his eyes and hummed to himself.

"We normally do not keep non-Shinigami in our city."

"You do if they are the children of Shinigami. If it will keep her close to us, then consider Nel Tu, Naruto's and my daughter."

The words tumbled out so fast she didn't realize exactly what they were until they were already spoken. The ninja aspect of her mind kicked in, effortlessly snapping to the best course of action available. What would Naruto say about it? They'd talked about having a gigantic family. They definitely wanted one. It had been something in the future though after they dealt with the current crisis and settled into this new world. For that matter, they were still growing into their relationship. They hadn't even…

An embarrassed blush lightly teased the uppermost part of her cheeks.

Yamamoto sipped at his own cup of tea with another hum.

"We shall see how this plays out one day at a time." Setting the cup down, he handed her a file. "However, there is another matter we must discuss."

Aizen leaned back in his throne, studying the contours of his hand. Nothing differed from its normal composition. The same calluses and lines decorated the palm. Yet, somehow, it seemed foreign to him. This was the hand he killed Momo with. It shouldn't matter. Human,

Quincy, Shinigami, and Hollow met their deaths to the Kido produced by this same hand. So what changed this time?

Why did it feel stained?

Even if, an extremely unlikely if, he felt some small degree of remorse for dispatching her. It ultimately shouldn't faze him. Soon, he would become the new god. Heaven and Hell, mortal and spiritual, all would be under his control. Should he deign it good, Momo would be resurrected and back by his side on a whim. Yes, what was there to be guilty of when life and death were mere labels he would be able to apply at will?

"I haven't seen you since we parted ways in Seireitei." Aizen didn't bother to shift his gaze as the familiar dark presence of the Earl slid to life behind his throne. "Did you run into trouble?"

"Not at all, my future ascendant. I merely needed to see to a few errands."

"Like assisting two of the otherworld Shinigami escape death?" The Earl walked around to the front of the throne. "For example."

The Earl crossed a hand over his heart and bowed low.

"They are inconsequential to your plans."

"You aren't surprised I know of this?"

"I would expect nothing less."

Aizen rose to his full height as he unleashed a warning pulse of reiatsu. The Earl straightened up slowly, his mocking grin never ceasing. The mad yellow eyes glinted defiantly behind the glasses as Aizen looked down his nose.

"I believe it is time you fully explain your plans. You say you are my ally, but you help the Shinigami after you attempt to kill them. You

want your Noah to be my blessed children. How? I will no longer allow secrets between us, Millennium Earl."

"Acting a god without first becoming one is a poor attitude, Sosuke Aizen. Perhaps, some would find your tone foolish, given I am the one who possesses the means to give you such a gift." The Earl summoned a chair out of the air and sat down, folding one leg over the other and clasping his knee. "There is no need to question my loyalties. This partnership of ours is a necessity and I genuinely enjoy our little talks. Threatening me merely makes you appear insecure. However, if it will put your mind at ease, I will tell you of my methodology. However, my reasons are for my bride and her alone. Agreed?"

"Bride?" Aizen allowed a perplexed expression to surface as he settled back into his throne and reigned his power back in. "Please, explain."

"The Noah originally called themselves human. I personally selected my family and blessed them with my power. That woman I helped, she carries all the qualities necessary to become a Noah, and more importantly, she will be able to become a mother to more Noah. Unlike the previous incarnation cursed by the Sage, she is untainted."

"You claimed the process must be voluntary. I fail to see how she would change sides."

"It is why I left the boy alive. His heart is weak now. I may be able to convince him that becoming Noah could finally spare him from a lifetime of pain. And should he fail to see the truth in my words, I can still use him to acquire her heart."

"It depends a great deal on manipulating emotions, a risky endeavor."

"A necessary one." The tips of his face-consuming smile dipped a nearly untraceable amount. "This is the last opportunity for me - for a

family."

Aizen declined saying he could likely will one into existence. Such a flippant response would undermine the value the Earl placed on his goal. While Aizen himself couldn't understand the need for such a thing as family, he could appreciate the desire to gain something by personal labors. Besides, when it came to dark matter, the mysteries around it might place it outside the realm of god.

"So, you use the boy and the girl to propagate your lineage. Should that fail, you hope to convince her to love you. Doing so will allow you a family and me a new multitude to oversee my dominion."

"Yes. It may take hundreds of years, but she would eventually see what lies underneath this pleasant demeanor of mine, and again, I have not quite given up on this Naruto. Should he decide to accept my offer, I would welcome him as my own son. I am as content being an uncle and grandfather as I would be a husband and a father."

"Very well. The more pertinent question remains. How do you plan to make me a god?"

A soft exhale swept between the Earl's teeth as the grin regained its full vigor. Hopping to his feet, he summoned a strange portal and motioned for Aizen to follow. They stepped in together, the darkness of the portal immediately replaced by a bright city. The winding streets were lined with flowers and other groomed greenery, giving color and life to the quaint silver-white homes and shops. The horizon rose above the rooftops, each new ring of buildings set higher up on the center hill than the last. Rising up out of the summit, a spiraling tower reached up to the infinite blue glow of the ethereal sky.

"This is quite the secret, my Earl."

"I didn't want to spoil your gift." A small platform materialized beneath their feet and levitated into the air. "This is the Ark. In my last battle, I reclaimed control of it by trapping the traitor, Nea, within the false

Black Ark. I'll spare you the boring details. Let us simply say he believed he held all the cards and let his guard down."

The platform rose closer to the peak of the tower, sailing past the open balcony of the final level. It returned into the floor as the Earl guided them to the center of the wide room. What could only be described as an altar reached from floor to ceiling. A swirling blue helix behind a diamond shaped prism comprised the core aspect, but two spots on either side appeared like they were missing pillars to complete the total design.

"The Ark exists outside of space and time, excluding the inability to access the foreign world of course." Climbing into one of the empty columns, the Earl held his arms high above his head as if chained. "This device will be activated by our dear Orihime and another. Using her power to reject creation, and the other man's ability to weave life and death, everything outside of this realm will be rend to nothing."

"Fascinating." Aizen walked around the device. "Although, two people would not be enough to fuel such obliteration."

"Did you truly believe my eradication of the hidden Quincy Empire only served to distract the Shinigami? No, my young ascendant. My weapon collected every precious drop of reishi and reiryoku those Quincy collected over the millennia. That will provide the power. The two pillars shall give it shape. The Hogyoku will control the pillars and manifest your will. As every facet of existence rips apart after the destroyer hunts down all life, it will simultaneously remake your very being. As the God of Genesis made everything from nothing, so to will you, the new god - the truly just god, appear in the void and create life anew."

Aizen felt himself smirk as the phantom tickle of excitement stirred in his chest. Already, his mind ticked off what he would and would not do, what he would make and unmake. So many wrongs would never occur. So many corrections to improve on such ramshackle design.

"The headband you requested I deliver to the Shinigami. I assume it is to bait their forces into the otherworld and further weaken the Gotei 13. You control the only gate so how are they going to arrive?"

"There has always been one place that connects our worlds. It is impossible to navigate, but in their desperation, they will attempt it. Their only option will be to travel through-"

"Hell, the only way to make it back to the ninja world is to find a connecting stream and make a door in Hell."

Naruto stuck out his bottom lip as he scratched sand out of his hair. He wasn't quite sure what his face looked like. It probably resembled something like he witnessed Hinata with two heads… three heads. She'd delivered it with a straight face, and that determined frown of hers only showed up when she became dead set on something. So yeah, it wasn't a joke.

Okay, no need to freak out.

"How are we supposed to do this?"

"A Zanpakuto is capable of opening a temporary doorway when it slays a hollow with a truly evil soul. The man who is helping us, Urahara-san, will make a similar door and provide us with a guide that will find the right stream by tracking a signature similar to ours - kind of like how Akamaru could tell what village a ninja came from."

"And how do we make a door?"

"He is still working on that part."

"And why Hell?"

"Because it is the only available plain that all existence is connected to. Regardless of what world they die in, the bad guys go to the

same hell. We find the path tying Hell to the ninja world and travel it in reverse."

Naruto nodded slowly and shook more sand from his Shihakusho, his wide-eyed expression never changing.

"You're trying to wrap your head around all of this aren't you?"

"Little bit." Shrugging his shoulders, he peeled off the tattered garment and brushed the sediment off his skin. "I'm assuming this is extremely dangerous and borderline impossible?"

"Yes." She tilted her head slightly to the side. "Why are you covered in sand?"

"Training with Gaara. Claimed he was too tired to pull the sand off of me when we were done." Naruto slapped at his pants. "When do we leave?"

"Two weeks." She stepped closer and placed a hand on his chest. "Are you okay with all of this?"

"I have to be." He forced a smile at her. "I still don't like any of this, but complaining and hiding won't fix it. We'll do our best."

Talking with Gaara made him realize he didn't have time to find resolve. Hollows gained strength proportionate to the strength of the soul they consumed. Ninja would have high spiritual energy, which would drastically increase the power of weaker hollows. Every single person who died increased the advantage Aizen and the Earl already had. His conflictions needed to be pushed aside and they needed to go home.

"Ah! They're going to do it right here like a couple of perverts." Nel slapped her hands over her eyes while peering through the gaps in her fingers. "Why don't you guys go do it in your own room instead of where other people walk? And Naruto, why are you trying to pressure Hinata into something like this without marrying her first?"

Hinata hopped back as a furious blush reddened everything from her face to her hands. Naruto's eye twitched as Nel carried on in a tirade, hurling the stray insult about Naruto's lack of chivalrous qualities and competence.

"Nel." Naruto kicked off his sandals in a cascade of sand. "This is our room,.not that we were doing anything like that anyway."

The little Arrancar paused mid-rant and studied the room with a scrunched up face. Slowly, a sheepish grin played off her lips as she scratched the back of her head.

"Whoops!"

Naruto groaned and fought to pull off his other caked sandal as Hinata laughed into her fist.

"Why are you barging in anyway, Nel?"

"Hinata-chan said she wanted to talk to me about something."

Hinata's face paled rapidly, eradicating the blush. Casting a nervous look at Naruto's unspoken question, the ex-heiress took a steadying breath.

"During the meeting with Yamamoto-san, the issue came up with what to do with where Nel would live. I ended up saying we would adopt her."

Naruto blinked. Maybe Gaara smacked him too hard in the head with his sand. Yeah, that'd make the most sense. First Hell and now a daughter, too many weird things were happening. It was all the symptoms of a massive concussion.

"Hey, hollows don't have parents!"

Hinata smiled kindly.

"You told us you have brothers."

"Brothers are different." Nel crossed her arms in a defiant huff. "Hollows don't need that sort of thing."

"Hollows don't need candy either, but you still like it. You also need to realize, Nel, this is primarily a way to decide who you will be staying with. How much you want to treat us like parents is up to you."

Nel placed her finger on her chin as her thoughts played out across her face. Slamming a fist into her palm, she marched over to Hinata. Almost hesitantly, the Arrancar wrapped her arms around the taller woman's legs in a hug. Hinata smiled down and rested a hand on top of the girl's mask.

Naruto felt something in his chest tremble. He'd never seen Hinata look so… was motherly the right word? The emotions pooled within him so intensely it almost hurt. Still, she was so beautiful in that moment, so at peace. He couldn't help but smile and want to simply stare at them. It only increased his confidence in asking her about what he discovered in Rukongai.

"Yeah, this is kind of nice." Nel skipped back with a goofy grin. "If it means I can stay with all of you, I'll deal with it."

Shikamaru scanned his village from the tallest peak of the Hokage monument. Ironically, it was his hair. Had it been any other day, he would have found amusement in that. Today though, the stress in every muscle fiber made him cramp with so much as a grin. The last three weeks had flown by far faster than normal. A whirlwind of preparation and barely suppressed panic had all the ninja running at full speed. Any reservations, any doubts, were eradicated with the grizzly deaths of a full jonin squad shortly after the prophesy's reveal. Sure, it could have been another enemy, but somehow everyone knew it was this other thing. Like an instinctual cringe deep in the soul, everyone knew.

If people were moving before, they practically flew after that. Shelters were fortified thrice over. The plans were drilled a dozen

more times and the back ups more so. Every ninja, civilian, and pet knew where to be and what to do. They all knew their survival rested in the hands of a few.

The only thing they could do was wait and pray the Great Toad Sage misread a vision on his death bed, hoping it had been a nightmare his mind played out in his final moments. And as each second ticked by and the eerie calm prevailed, a sense of relief grew.

He couldn't feel relief, not until the next morning- not until the moon revolved into its next cycle. Over twenty hours remained and he would stay on his perch until he was absolutely sure nothing would come.

"If you don't take a breath, your heart will give out before the monsters can tear you apart."

He sighed as his wife landed next to him.

"Berating you for not staying with the civilians probably wouldn't do me any good would it?"

"I'm not so pregnant I can't run away." She placed a hand on her slightly swollen belly. "Don't worry; I won't risk this little one by fighting."

"I know." He reached out and grabbed her hand. "Why don't you keep an eye on the village so I can watch the clouds and take a nap."

"It's nothing, but gray overcast."

"They can still be watched."

"You have to be the laziest Kage in all of history."

"Every leader needs a nickname." He chuckled and gave a reassuring squeeze. "How is everyone doing?"

"The genin and retirees are keeping the civilians in line. The main forces are ready for the first sign of trouble."

"And the special unit?"

"I think they're the only ones you don't have to worry abou-"

The air rumbled around them as a black maw tore open in the sky. Fear induced bile soured the back of his throat as hundreds of presences poured out. Another hole appeared, then another, and another, each one depositing an invisible bone-chilling rain of dread.

Another opened directly in front of him and a rotund man slowly walked out of the darkness to the edge of the void.

"Good evening."

Author's Notes:

I had originally planned to begin posting new chapters mid-October (as September continued the summer's craziness). However, I did not want to risk missed weeks as I believe part of the struggle gaining readers for this story has been its infrequent updates. So, I focused on completing the 1st draft of the story in its entirety. It took two weeks longer than I expected and was about a 150 pages longer than planned, but it is done and I can focus on editing things chapter by chapter now. The biggest benefit is that I will now be able to deliver a new chapter every Saturday (between 8 and 10pm Eastern) every single week until Rend's conclusion. And, as thanks for your patience, I will also deliver an extra chapter this upcoming week on Wednesday (same time as regular schedule).

I hope this chapter was worth the wait. It is a little slower paced, but it sets up the next arc in a single chapter. The Earl's memory scene actual came about as I was working on later chapters. Building on him and Aizen as more complex villains was always intended, but I felt having the Earl dream about his history was more dynamic than

doing it entirely through dialogue. As always, I am curious as to your thoughts.

On a more personal note, thank you very much to everyone who wrote words of support and encouragement about the situation with my building.

See you Wednesday.

Descend

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 14

Naruto tugged on the sleeves of his new jacket and rechecked that all his tools were securely stored away in his pant pouches. It felt good to have his familiar gear on him again. For only having a verbal description, the tailor did an incredibly accurate job replicating his normal attire minus the headband. The stitching held up to his normal testing, so he shouldn't have to worry about losing scrolls. If the ninja world stood any chance, they needed what he had stored within the parchment. The Urahara guy swore it would work and Ichigo vouched for the odd shopkeeper.

Hinata zipped up her new coat and pulled her long hair free. She'd opted for her original look with some slight tweaks to her jacket. She'd requested it be made a little more form fitting so it didn't conflict with the garment and weapons her Zanpakuto produced. Apparently, the claws liked to catch in stray pieces of fabric.

Lee's clothes were the biggest change. Like the more unruly hair and thinned eyebrows, he'd embraced aspects of their new life. He'd kept the skin tight green top, but went for looser black pants and Shinigami footwear. When asked about the leg warmers, Lee grinned and said the bandages didn't need to be covered up.

"I'm still not sure we need this large of a team." Naruto spoke to Hinata under his breath and quickly glanced at Ichigo talking with his friends. "Nine people are tough to keep track of."

"You are the one who thought Ichigo might be able to deal with Aizen's Zanpakuto if he learned how to dispel genjutsu."

"And none of us can cast it, I know. He makes sense. Gaara would have made sense. The other three maybe, but Nel and Karin aren't fighters."

"Urahara believes Nel should be able to open a Garganta directly back here once she gets to that side. Karin will be our medic so I can focus on combat. Remember what Yamamoto-san told us. Hell is a nightmare world and the few expeditions ended with only a handful of Shinigami ever returning."

Of course he remembered. Five different levels of horrific landscapes populated by miserable souls and giant lumbering gorilla demons playing torturer. They'd also been warned the realm would wreak havoc with Ichigo's hollow powers and maybe screw Nel up. If the boost was really as huge as Ichigo made it sound, his inner-hollow's power could cause some problems. Nel… he'd make sure she stayed okay.

None of that bothered him too much though. Dealing with bad odds wasn't anything new. With Hinata and Lee, all those potential problems could be handled. What did bother him was the risk that it would affect Kyubi. If the very atmosphere got Ichigo's inner-hollow frothy, who knew what it would do to an eternally pissed demon fox.

"I believe you should be in charge of this mission, Naruto-kun." Lee stretched out for the hundredth time since they grouped up. "You have the most experience leading a team."

"I had Shikamaru's help last time." He frowned and waved everyone in. "Alright, since most of you have no concept of teamwork or how to operate within a mission, here's how this is going to work."

He pointed at the watch on Ichigo's wrist.

"Since you have the tracker and the device to make an exit, you're taking point. Hinata, I want you behind him, keeping him in check."

Ichigo grumbled as Hinata moved over to her position.

"Karin and Nel, you're with me in the center. Lee, you cover Karin if we get in trouble and need her. Sado, you back me up since I'll be carrying Nel."

Nel shook the fabric of her Shihakusho.

"I have pants this time so we're all good!"

"I assume you want Kuchiki-san and myself to take up the rear then?" Uryu readjusted the gloves on his hands. "What do you want us to do there?"

"You have speed and range so you can cover everyone. Rukia's ice can secure the widest area, so she can slow down any potential threats coming up from behind." Naruto made sure to glare at the non-ninja in the group. "I know you guys are used to doing things a certain way and like to get one on one with who you're fighting. That's not happening this time. We stay as a group."

"If we are dragged into combat, we may not have a choice." Rukia kneeled down and started scribbling on a piece of paper with some crayons. "We can't risk stopping the entire group with every conflict. As my picture will demonstrate, we could get completely trapped by the Kushanada."

"Why is she drawing?"

"It's a thing of hers." Ichigo rolled his eyes. "Just ignore it. You won't be able to tell what it is anyway."

Rukia leapt up and stomped her foot down on Ichigo's face. The Substitute yelped and clutched his bruised nose as Nel pointed and laughed.

"Fool! Don't mock my cute little rabbit pictures."

They began squabbling as Naruto ran a hand down his face.

To think, if I'd become Hokage, I would have had to deal with genin squad's like this all the time.

With a sigh, he tore off the corner from one of his custom tags and tossed it at their feet. It hissed and exploded with a small pop, forcing the bickering duo to hop back in surprise.

"We're told the air is rough on reiatsu, kind of like murky water. Chances are we won't be able to find each other. I will try Sage Mode if necessary, but the risk of it frying my brain is pretty high so let's not rely on that. I'm not leaving anyone behind either. So I'll say it again, we stay together."

The gateway blared to life a few hundred feet away from them. Someone called for them, but Naruto paused as Gaara stepped out from around the corner. The raccoon-eyed Captain reached out with his hand and Naruto firmly shook it.

"I'm sorry I can't come with you."

"I know, but someone has to kick ass on this side. Can't trust these Shinigami to do it." Naruto's grip tightened. "You gonna be alright without me being around to save you?"

"So says the man who is currently loosing in our sparring sessions."

"I've rescued you twice, still winning."

"Don't you have a world to save - again?" Gaara let go and nodded his head toward the gate. "You need to head out."

"Yeah." Naruto spun around and glanced over his shoulder. "After bathing in sand daily for the past couple of weeks, I'm going to be pissed if you lose to that smirking snake bastard."

Taking off in a sprint, he scooped up Nel and tossed her onto his back so she could wrap her arms around his neck. Everyone followed suit as he charged straight into the wall of light. The world swirled into a tunnel then quickly shifted into a red sky. The portal shut behind them as gravity took hold and dragged them down in a pure freefall to the city of floating cubes below. Unlike the stale death that haunted Hueco Mundo, a pungent stench of despair and decay burned his nose.

"Ichigo get in front and start getting us directions. We're going to hit the ground running!"

"Can you guys land safely from this high up?"

"We'll use those monsters as springboards!"

Towering behemoths the size of skyscrapers rose upward, massive cleavers gleaming in their gigantic fists. Even floating, they remained hunched over on all fours, their long flesh-free skulls peering up with the calm assurance of experienced butchers.

"Naruto-kun." Lee's hair whipped furiously around his head as he caught Karin by the waist. "They are slow enough to get around."

"That's the plan. Dodge!"

Making sure Nel's grip on him stayed tight enough she wouldn't fall, he twisted into a spin and pushed reiryoku to his feet. Sliding down the flat of the first blade swinging for him, he sprung off at the hilt and vaulted over the Kushanada's elbow. Lee jumped off the one to his left as Naruto followed Hinata and raced down the exposed spine of the next beast in line.

"Taju Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

The clones rapidly linked up hand to ankle, forming a series of human chains as the top Bunshin buried kunai into the back legs of the Kushanada. Diving off the monster, Naruto caught the last clone

in line and swung down in a wide loop. Letting go, he bounced between the cube buildings until he landed on the crystal blue street. Everyone quickly landed around him as more Kushanada flowed through the environment as intangible specters.

"Get in formation and move!"

Everyone scrambled into position as the city residents shrieked in terror and the massive wardens dispatched misery upon anyone they caught. The maze of streets cut left and right in a perfectly square grid, allowing the Kushanada to effortlessly get in front of them.

"We're getting boxed in." Hinata dodged to the side. "More are filling in from all directions. Ichigo's tracker is saying straight down."

"How did you-"

"I'll explain about my eyes later, Ichigo. I don't see any kind of ground beneath us, Naruto."

"How dependable is this Urahara guy?" Naruto tossed a kunai behind him wrapped in an explosive tag. It detonated against the outstretched hand grasping for him. "Anyone?"

"He is not undependable." Rukia had the least hesitant expression out of the Shinigami group. "We can have faith in his inventions."

"Good enough for me. Dive over the road!"

Descending into the darkness, the miasma like atmosphere thickened to a choking fog. More hands reached out from the lower levels of the buildings, pawing at them. Rukia drew her Zanpakuto, the generic katana shimmering into a pure white blade and faced skyward. Slashing out, a pristine circle appeared above her then exploded in a frigid pillar of ice. The hands froze as the ice plugged the route above them.

The sky opened under them, revealing an endless ocean dotted by grand stone flowers. Naruto glanced around. Good, they weren't being followed. Another pillar of ice rushed past the group.

"Use the pillar to slide down," Rukia called out. "We can regroup on that flower."

Naruto reached out, pushing reiryoku into his palm so it firmly connected with the chilly surface. Nel threw up her hands and whooped as they spiraled around the column and flakes of snow tickled their faces. He dropped off, landing softly on the flower's rim. The skeleton of one of the Kushanada rested within the stone bloom's center - its cleaver driven straight down its skull.

"That's cheery." Ichigo stood beside him and rubbed at his right eye. "Damn, it won't stop itching."

Naruto watched as the black sclera of his hollow powers reverted to the human white.

He doesn't realize his inner hollow is already fighting to come out.

"How's your control doing?" Naruto's hand inched toward one of his pockets. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah, why do you ask?"

He'd designed a potent sealing tag in case Ichigo,… or himself, got out of control. Hinata had a few incase the worst happened. Of course, once they fully went berserk, the tags would be useless. The only chance they had was getting the tags on before their energies got too potent.

"Just stay really aware of yourself and your emotions. We know this place will bring out the worst in your powers. If you even sneeze, tell me. Don't be stubborn and brush it off. Okay?"

Ichigo froze, his hand hovering over his eye as realization washed over his sharp features. He let his hand drop and nodded sternly.

"I won't put anyone at risk. I promise."

"Good." Naruto glanced up as Nel peered over the top of his head quizzically. "The same goes for you too, Nel."

"I'm good. Although, I really want to do that ice slide again."

"Yeah, that was fun."

"Those guardians don't seem to be following us." Sado pat Nel on the head as he walked up and towered over everyone. "Where do we head next?"

Ichigo held up his arm and checked the small screen on his wrist.

"It's still saying down." He flicked his hand. "Maybe it's broken?"

"No, if I extend my vision straight down, the environment changes again. Remember, Urahara-san said to think of Hell as having levels."

"Yes, we can't assume this dimension follows the same environmental laws as the human world or Soul Society." Rukia sheathed her blade. "No one possesses any real knowledge of this place except its inhabitants. The only thing we can do is trust in that device and our strengths."

"Well said, Rukia-chan." Lee pumped his fist. "Combined, our flames of youth will see us through here safely!"

"I wouldn't bank on that, eyebrows!"

A wave surged up out of the ocean and completely swallowed them and the granite they stood upon. An invisible drag carried them deeper into the water until the bottom opened into another sky. The

giant bubble housing them fell like a giant rain drop and struck the ashen earth in a soaking splash.

Naruto sputtered and coughed as he quickly pushed himself to his feet and made sure Nel still held on tight. He scanned the barren landscape of charred cliffs and reeking pools of lava. The others quickly found their feet and readied their weapons, forming a circle to protect each other's backs.

Their assailant stepped up onto the ridge, resting a hand on his knee as the body-length bandaged sword rested over his shoulders. Naruto's mouth ran dry as more shadows took shape on either side of the first.

"Well now, isn't this a blast from the past."

"What's the matter, girlie? Does your skin burn seeing me again?"

"Naruto." Ichigo inched over to him. "Naruto, what's wrong? Who are these guys? Naruto!"

The blonde ninja never took his eye off of the assembled enemies. He recognized many of those faces. The powerful missing-nin once decorated in black cloaks with red clouds who had hunted him and those like him. The serpentine sneer of the man who plucked the thread that would ultimately unravel Team Seven - his first family. And his heart went cold as the thread himself came to the forefront.

"Sasuke."

"Get those civilians in the bunkers now!" Shikamaru brought his hands up in the rat hand seal. "Kagezukami no Jutsu."

His shadow shot out, snatching the shadow of the bolder blocking the passage and swung it down on top of the ninja who's upper torso hung limply in the air. Slightly changing the angle of his hand sign, his shadow split into a hundred tendrils.

"Kage-Ami no Jutsu."

Weaving amongst each other, the shadows formed a net overhead. Invisible hands crashed down on the makeshift shield, forcing Shikamaru to his knees as the ninja ushered the non-combatants underground. More strikes joined the first, each blow threatening to shake his hands apart and dispel the technique.

"They're inside, Hokage-sama!"

"Seal it. Everyone who knows a fire jutsu, target a section of the net. I want flames replacing my technique."

The assembled ninja did as instructed, blurring through signs then unleashing streams of fire. Releasing the net, he almost swore he could hear the faintest of pained shrieks like those of something very far away, so muted it was impossible to tell if the listener imagined it. Something tore a swath of the burning cage away, bisecting the closest ninja as large depressions formed against the barrier.

"They're breaking in!"

Shikamaru studied the swelling bubbles with an annoyed sneer. If he wasn't imagining that wailing, it meant the flames were inflicting pain, just not enough to deter them. They needed it hotter - much hotter.

Ino!

I'm here! His old teammate's voice flowed into his thoughts. *I've got my hands full so make it quick!*

We're pinned down at bunker four. Contact Kushina and Yugao. I need them to use their wind and flame Konbijutsu to incinerate everything surrounding our barrier.

Another tear formed in the ceiling and Shikamaru slammed his hands into position, dragging the unsuspecting chunin away from the opening as a large paw print formed in the dirt where he once stood.

"There you are. Kage Nui no Jutsu." The shadow tendrils shot up from the ground, impaling and binding the phantom creature. It recoiled, the strands barely keeping attached. Anticipating the reaction, Shikamaru tugged hard, flinging the beast into the fire as a shrill whistle pierced the roaring gap. "Everyone, get down!"

White hot flames washed over the dome as it began to twist. Wind swept underneath the rising fireball, lifting the increasingly oppressive heat and warping it into a slowly twisting vortex. Peeking over his elbow as the searing temperature singed every uncovered hair, the Hokage watched as the spiraling column rose higher and the fire became so bright it hurt to look at it.

"These bastards don't know how to die quietly. Let's see how they like being diced!"

Minato appeared by Shikamaru's head instantly. A clammy sweat coated his sickly pale skin as a barely repressed tremor ran over his shoulders. He placed a hand on the acting Hokage's shoulder as the fireball took on a sharper rotation.

"She's not going to be able to finish them off. They aren't susceptible enough to chakra."

"It's like we feared then. We should retreat."

"Agreed."

Kushina's technique exploded, dozens of burning demons escaping from the inferno. Shikamaru felt his palms sweat as the fires gave form to the once invisible predators. They consisted of different shapes and sizes. Some compared similarly to human, while others devolved from animalistic to specters born within depraved nightmares. The only constants were the strange masks they wore - and the soulless eyes framed by the flames.

Shikamaru directed his shadow to snag everyone as the phantoms descended. Minato's grip tightened, and in a flash, they were on the

opposite side of the village. Scores of more ninja leapt down from the rooftops. Some were missing a foot or an entire arm; others had bloody bandages covering sides of their faces and torsos. All looked haggard, but all stood determined.

It hadn't even been an hour and they were already scrambling. He knew it would be bad. They planned for it and calculated precisely how outmatched they would be. The reality though always carried a different weight to it. There wasn't any more hope it wouldn't be the worst case scenario. You couldn't be optimistic that maybe it wouldn't be as bad as the prophesy made it sound or that your assumptions about the enemy were exaggerated. Only the cold fact that you were right stared straight back at you. Only the fortitude to save whoever remained breathing kept you from collapsing;

"What is the status of the civilians?" Shikamaru released his technique and stood to his full height. "Are all the bunkers sealed?"

"There has been a complication." Neji stepped forward as the veins pulsed around his eyes. "The hat wearing creature who attacked you is attempting to compromise the bunkers. He succeeded with bunker number five… there are no survivors."

"Why is he going after the civilians?" Minato popped a soldier pill, restoring a little color to his face.

"He greeted me immediately before he attacked. The ability to speak alone makes him different from the rest. Add to that his attacks were more about keeping me preoccupied than scoring a kill and now this-" Shikamaru's jaw tightened. "He's using the civilians to keep us here."

"There was nothing to indicate these things were driven by anything other than instinct. For anyone with sentience, it wouldn't be difficult to see we're separating everyone for a reason."

"We're going to get swarmed again if we don't move quick." Kushina tightened her headband with a scowl. "What do you want us to do,

Hokage-sama?"

"I can engage him." Minato closed his eyes. "If Hyuga-dono tells me where he is now, I can get there in an instant."

Kushina absently tugged at her hair.

"You are already on the verge of exhaustion and we need you to teleport everyone above the chakra cutoff line to Amegakure in a single shot. He's too strong for us to risk you."

"Judging from the damage occurring around him, he's likely surrounded by the invisible creatures. And while I at first thought my Byakugan was failing, I suspect the blurry patches in my vision are those monsters."

"Then, it would be wise to send someone who is well suited for both large groups and individual combat." Shino crouched down from the ledge above. "I will go."

"You understand it is likely suicide, Shino."

Anyone not familiar with the Aburame would have missed it, but Shikamaru knew he'd taken the briefest of glimpses at Yugao before he nodded and disappeared.

Shino was the strongest in the village. He posed the best chance of succeeding even if death was all but certain. However, it also meant taking out a key piece in the battle plan and weakening them in future encounters.

It meant losing a dear friend.

"The bunkers." Shikamaru faced the clan head as he buried his emotions under the guise of a leader. "They need to be secure before we push for the rally point."

"The gray creature has compromised bunker five and is attacking bunker eight. Shino will not make it in time, but will prevent the

monster from destroying anymore." Neji twisted his head and paled. "The special bunker for academy students and others with above civilian levels of chakra is empty."

"Find them, Neji."

"Four blocks north of the bunker. They are unharmed, but the escort team can't move them forward."

Wind snapped up around them and many ninja tightened their gear.

"We anticipated this might happen which is why we placed their bunker near the escape seal." Swallowing the nervousness rumbling in his chest, Shikamaru grabbed one of his trench knives and pushed chakra into his feet. "Yugao. Contact the Yamanaka's and have them tell everyone to shift into the next stage. The rest of you, go help the escort group."

Shikamaru caught Minato on the shoulder as the other ninja zipped away in a series of blurs. Far too easily, he made the Yondaime turn around and face him. He'd sweat straight through his flak jacket and the younger Hokage felt him wobble with the mere weight of a hand.

"Can you do this, Yondaime-sama?"

"Yes." Minato smiled awkwardly. "I kind of have to."

"What about the contingency plan?"

The slight tensing of the muscles spoke volumes.

"I don't know. The system worked well during testing, but the amount of chakra needed now-"

"It's a lot to ask and has a high chance of failure. We don't have a choice though. Shino can't stop this guy and every last civilian will be killed once we leave." Shikamaru let him go. "I couldn't be sure until now, but I'm positive this attack is exclusive to Konoha."

"What?"

"I keep going over the prophesy and everything we know about these monsters. Once a person dies, they feed on his or her soul. And as we've seen, they are actively hunting ninja with higher chakra levels, unless someone recently dead is next to them. So they choose an available soul first followed by the highest chakra level that can become prey."

"You're wondering why he's guiding them to civilians when they naturally gravitate to the strongest ninja they can take down. You said he was doing it to keep us here."

"I believe that is a part of it, but I think there is more to it. There were over seventy attacks on ninja villages. Ten of them were actual squads of chunin or higher. Out of all of them, only one forehead protector was missing."

"Ours. You think he has a personal vendetta against Konoha."

"No, it's more specific than that. He knew to attack me. He knew how destroying the monument would hit us psychologically. When he had me backpedalling, every blast was pinpoint, except for a single random shot that destroyed Ichiraku. I know about the Great Toad Sage's original prophesy and the Child. Minato, this gray man isn't destroying Konoha on a whim. Naruto's alive and that monster is sending him a message."

"From the looks on your guys' faces and the fact we're in Hell." Ichigo gripped Zangetsu with both hands. "I'm guessing that group is trouble."

"Yes, and they are very strong." Hinata's eyes darted between the one with the plant head and the scowling guy radiating death at Naruto. "They bring up some bad memories."

Ichigo glanced at the ninja among his friends. His trainer's eyes were filled with confusion and sadness, but his lips had curled back into a snarl, exposing a canine as his whisker marks darkened. Lee's usually jovial face had hardened into something completely foreign and darker. Hinata appeared the least bothered by the opposition, despite the flickering shudders that rolled through her every time she saw the plant head or the guy with the ridiculously white skin… were they related?

"Ichigo." Uryu moved up behind him and spoke in a whisper. "Our ninja companions' reiatsu is fluctuating all over the place. This group is bringing a lot of powerful emotions out of them. I would suggest we cut this reunion short."

"And how would we do that?"

"With your normal brutal methods."

"Sounds good to me!" Ichigo lifted his zanpakuto high over his head, bright blue energy coursing down the entire edge of his blade. "Getsuga Tensho!"

He couldn't help but grin as the towering wave carved a canyon out of the ground and threatened to eliminate the opposing group in a single pass. The sky shook as the lava within the pools blew back from the sheer pressure of his attack. Ever since his battle with Aizen, it'd felt like more and more power had awakened within him. Almost like something once held back had started to seep in. His control had taken a bit of a hit at first, but with the last few weeks of intensified training, he'd managed to get it back to acceptable levels.

Heh, listen to me. I almost sound like Naruto.

The blast stopped with a metallic screech as something pushed back against it. A new reiatsu washed over the landscape and surpassed his wave's. Then, like smoke caught in the wind, his attack dissipated into a broken ether. Ichigo stared dumbstruck as the

newcomer rested his odd blade in the crook of his elbow and slowly clapped.

"Very good, young man. Very good!"

Taller than all the others beside the fish dude, the slender man stood with an air of regality that set him apart from the rest standing behind him. His silver hair stopped an inch shy of the high-collared black kimono billowing over him. Red tomoe adorned the brim of the collar and his sleeves, matching the gnarled teeth hooking out from the edge of his thin rectangular blade.

The man smiled warmly, only cooling as his opaque eyes skimmed over Hinata.

"How the hell did he stop that?" Ichigo mumbled to himself more than anyone else. "Kind of pisses me off."

"He just vaporized the biggest Getsuga Tensho I have ever seen you unleash and your reaction is to be annoyed?" Rukia sighed and lifted her hands into the air. "I don't know whether to call you a fool or be happy you're remaining relatively calm."

"I worked really hard on making it that good!" Ichigo pointed at the man. "And he didn't even give me a chance to take some pride in the results."

"Surely that isn't the best you can do, Ichigo." Uryu stepped up beside him as a silver bow materialized in his hand. "If it is, I suggest you sit back and let a Quincy handle this."

"Now, now, children shouldn't fight amongst themselves." Ichigo cringed as the man draped his arms over both his and Uryu's necks like his father had done to him so many times in the past, the strange sword inches from their necks. "Neither of you are able to stand against me."

When did he move?

The man vanished as Sado's armor covered fist punctured the after image of his head.

"Don't let your guard down." Sado nodded at the encroaching group. "They look ready to jump in at any time."

"I remember how much my sons liked to roughhouse." The man reappeared in front of them and jabbed his sword into the ground. "Alright, I'll play along."

He moved in a flicker, moving between them and quickly wrestling all three to the ground with a laugh. Ichigo attempted to slip out of a headlock, but the man twisted, tightening the choke to a strangling degree.

The air turned frigid as Rukia appeared directly overhead and stabbed down at the man's defenseless midsection. He zipped away and her blade pierced and froze the earth. Ichigo sprang to his feet as laughter came from straight ahead. The man already sat on the ledge in front of the others like he'd never left.

"What fun. What fun indeed." The man blew out a calming breath and reached out. A chain shot out from the sleeve of his kimono and snared his sword. "I was right that none of you can stand against me, which makes me the winner. To celebrate my victory, let's have a festival!" The chain snapped the sword back to his hand. "I haven't had someone sacrificed in my name in years."

"I beg you, Jashin-sama." The gray haired man with a scythe on his back leapt down and kneeled at the foot of the cliff. "Allow me to repent for my failure against the sand-nin seven years ago and extract a gloriously painful death from the one you wish to have sacrificed."

"Cut the crap." Ichigo readied his zanpakuto again. "I don't know what twisted game you're playing at, but no one's important enough they need a living sacrifice."

"You insolent little bag of sh-"

Hidan gagged as his master appeared in front of him and roughly punched into his mouth.

"Language, Hidan." Jashin ripped out Hidan's tongue in a fountain of blood. "You can have this back after you've learned not to misuse it."

Hidan gurgled a screech and fell to his knees as his hands failed to hold back the deluge of crimson pouring out of his mouth. Yet, even in the midst of the pain, the sadist touched his forehead to the ground in an act of servitude. Jashin tossed the tongue over his shoulder with a shrug and wiped his hand off on Hidan's hair.

"To answer your question young man, my name is Jashin." Sitting down on the back of his kneeling servant, the man crossed one leg over another. "Tell me little ninjas, have you heard of me?"

"Jashin was the name of an evil god whose followers found anything less than total destruction and death to be a sin." Hinata inched closer to Naruto. "Hidan was the last known practitioner of that religion."

"Yes, that would be the only name people would remember me by wouldn't it." Jashin trailed off, almost somberly, as his gaze drifted out across the desolate landscape. "While I did appreciate the conviction, I would have likely been satisfied with less violent methods."

"Enough of this pointless chatter." The wrathful man Naruto had called Sasuke leapt down as a dark aura swirled around him. "It is time I avenged my pride as an Uchiha."

"Sasuke-kun. Why are you here?" Karin hesitantly stepped forward. "Sasuke-kun, look at me. Don't you recognize me?"

Lee clamped a hand on her shoulder.

"Get back, Karin-san." Lee's voice sounded tight, like he barely could control the emotions constricting in his throat. "Do not go near him."

Karin's face twisted up in confusion as Lee firmly pulled her behind him.

"It doesn't appear that we will be allowed to leave here unopposed." The pure white ribbon of Rukia's zanpakuto swayed as her reiatsu slowly climbed. "We will have to force our way through."

"Are you that eager to die, child?" The doll-faced red-head sauntered to the edge of the cliff, his body clacking like wood against wood. "I won't keep you waiting."

"Lee, everyone, leave Sasuke to me." Naruto spoke softly and stood to his full height. "I need to handle him."

Jashin's reiatsu swept over all of them, the crushing pressure making everyone's knees buckle.

"So much aggression." His power intensified as he stood and calmly paced back and forth. "I suppose it is good to see this place so lively after the many dreary millennia that have passed."

Ichigo pressed down on his knees and forced himself upright. Whether the bastard was a god or just another wannabe, his power definitely wasn't lacking. It made his insides churn as the potency of the reiatsu stung every inch of his soul. Still, if he focused past that, he could almost feel a ceiling to it. For whatever reason, he knew he could match it. No, he knew he could surpass it.

"I know." Jashin tapped his fist into an open hand. "Why don't we have a friendly competition? All of you may fight to your hearts' content and the winners will be rewarded with a place by my side. The losers, well, I need the strongest for my march out of Hell. I have no interest in the rest of you."

The pressure vanished. Ichigo studied each adversary as they collected themselves. None of them seemed too bothered by being tossed aside. Were they that confident they would win, or unlike the mouthy one, didn't have any real attachment to Jashin? It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to guess he kept them in line by throwing his strength around. Either way, Naruto and the others had more to lose, which would push them to win. Hopefully, they wouldn't get reckless and separate. He realized now how that never worked out well.

"All of you need to remember you're going up against S-class missing-nin. They were wanted for horrible crimes and feared for what they could do. They'll be a hell of a lot trickier to fight than you're used to. If something seems like an obvious opening, it's intentional." Naruto summoned a Kage Bunshin for each member of their team. "My clones will try and fill you in on any weak-"

Silver hair shot out and pierced each clone between the eyes, dispelling them in puffs of smoke. The strands retracted back to Jashin as he waggled his finger.

"I wouldn't want anyone to lose via cheating." Jashin smiled exasperatingly as he rubbed his forehead. "I guess we need to lay down some ground rules. First, you shall remain in the competition until you reach me at the lowest level. Second, you must fight someone at least once; can't have people sneak their way onto my team. Third." He stretched out a long finger and sharply pointed at Naruto, Ichigo, and Hinata. "These three are ineligible to partake in the competition."

Sasuke-s blood red eyes flared to life alongside his reiatsu

"No! Naruto Uzumaki and the other dead last are mine."

"Sasuke." Jashin's light tone failed to hide the frightening aura hanging beneath the surface. "You will be given the chance to talk to Naruto - when I deem it time."

Ichigo swung Zangetsu out to the side.

"What's the matter? You afraid we'll mess up your little game?"

That's right; keep him talking so everyone has a chance to form a plan. We need to be the ones to pick who we're going to fight.

"Don't think I can't sense those monsters inside both you and the Jinchuriki, young man. I need those terrors to escape this pit and conquer the worlds. I will bring out their full power within you, leaving you two as nothing more than subservient war hounds. Do not misunderstand my kindness - you are simple animals to me." Jashin cast a cold glare at Hinata. "And I have no use for a spoilt child who threw away the gifts of her ancestors. Kill her and you automatically win a place at my side."

A single, tiny flicker of panic ran over Naruto's face. Sasuke spotted it and unsheathed his sword, launching straight for Hinata. Naruto vanished, the stone fracturing from the force of his take off. He reappeared with a feral roar as putrid orange-red reiryoku bubbled out over him and his kunai clashed against the sword.

Jashin motioned a hand over one of the craters. The lava rolled to the side as his other hand snapped out, chains ensnaring Ichigo by the neck. The Substitute struggled to stay standing as the binding went taught.

"Lead him this way, Sasuke."

"Naruto-kun!"

Lee went for the blonde, but the fish guy blocked him.

"We have unfinished business, eye-brows!"

Sado slugged the blue-skinned man across the face.

"Everyone needs to spread out a bit so we don't hurt each other in the crossfire." He lifted Ichigo up over his head. "You focus on that

guy. I will make sure no one else can come after you."

"Uh, Chad?"

Ichigo yelped as the giant flung him into the crater. Jashin shrugged his shoulders and hopped in. Sasuke followed with a scowl, Naruto diving in right behind him. Clearing his head, Ichigo chopped the chain off his neck and held his sword in front him. If Chad trusted him enough to not want to stand back to back, he wouldn't let him down.

"Bankai!"

"El Directo." Sado punched the ground as a blue blast erupted from his fist and rocked the battlefield, scattering the opposing sides. The cavern rumbled as deep fissures merged with lava pools and toppled cliffs. "Hm, this place is more fragile than I thought."

Nel crawled onto his shoulders and hammered her fist on top of his head to no effect.

"You don't cause an earthquake when you're underground!"

"We're not underground.." Sado pointed upward at the ash-laden clouds swirling above. "There's a sky above us."

"Sado. Why did you practically hand Ichigo over to the enemy?" Uryu readjusted his glasses and readied his bow.

Sado grunted and gave a big thumbs up.

"That's not an answer!"

Hinata ignored their banter and forced herself to look away from the lava pool Naruto and Ichigo disappeared into. The Kyubi's presence always strengthened within Naruto if his emotions became more

negative and no one knew how this place would influence the biju. Sasuke alone would bring out the worst in him.

He always stole Naruto's focus.

No, now wasn't the time for bad memories.

The Akatsuki required her full attention. Her team, while powerful, lacked the understanding of the intricacies of a ninja battle, especially if the opposing group splintered off into their original teams. Orochimaru alone could outsmart everyone combined. However, the assembled opposition didn't bother her as much as the absent ones.

Itachi Uchiha, despite the confidential reveal of his loyalty, had a lot of blood on his hands. It was possible he decided against joining in and remained alone somewhere in Hell. The entry in the Bingo Book made it clear he could exist comfortably in any situation, and if he truly did serve Konoha as an undercover agent, they didn't need to worry about him ambushing them. He'd likely also be in constant pursuit of Danzo, given that man's direct hand in many of Konoha's tragedies.

Which left Madara, the most dangerous and powerful man from their world. Not being here leading his organization, had Naruto failed to kill him?

"Where is Madara?" The hair on the back of her neck stood as Orochimaru chuckled in his infamously unsettling drawl.

"You are concerned Naruto-kun failed to make his sacrifice count are you?" He hissed as his long tongue peeked out from between his lips. "Don't worry child, the legendary Uchiha followed the rest of us into this place."

"Then why are you taking orders from Jashin?"

"When you see the Jinchuriki of the ten-tails flattened and his power stolen by a new guy, you follow the new guy." Kisame tore off the bandages from his sword. Its individual scales wiggling hungrily. "I can actually be pretty loyal, but when your boss is reduced to a shell and dragged underground by chains… no one left to be loyal to."

She and Lee exchanged shocked looks.

"Enough chit-chat." Sasori's body shifted under the tattered cloak. "I am tired of waiting."

"Change of plans, the big guy gets shaved first for sucker punching me. Eye-brows goes second."

Hinata quickly swept her vision over the area, spotting a single hall of stairs heading underground. Less than a mile away over the next series of cliffs and plateaus. It teamed with plant life and the reiryoku of the one who killed her, an obvious trap that gave him a clear mental advantage.

"Hinata-chan, head after Naruto-kun and Ichigo." Lee's gauntlets and greaves burned to life over his limbs. "You have already found the exit, correct?"

"I shall go with you." Rukia carefully moved to her side. "That fool will likely get himself in trouble and need to be reprimanded."

The Akatsuki made no attempt to stop them.

Hinata's overall speed kept her at the front, but Rukia's use of Shunpo allowed her to keep up in short bursts. Reiatsu exploded behind them as the fights broke out, allowing Zetsu and Orochimaru to slip away. She tracked them slithering underground, the conflicting patterns showing they weren't working together. Rather, Orochimaru passed the human plant and headed to the next level below.

"Rukia-san, the exit is a trap. That strange looking man with the flytrap around his head has lined the passage with his energy. The

plants will attempt to eat us, and if we cut them, they will release pressurized acid."

"How did you defeat him last time?"

"I sacrificed myself."

"Oh."

Two more broke away from the main skirmish and chased after them. The tongue-less one and the stitch covered one. They couldn't afford to have them catch up in the middle of dealing with Zetsu. Her anxiousness to get to Naruto and the nervousness about facing her killer couldn't compromise her decision making.

"There are two reiatsu closing in on us. I will take care of them." Rukia slid to a stop and faced them. "Face your old enemy and win decisively. Then, we will continue toward Ichigo and Naruto."

Hinata never paused. The shorter woman read her well. She never cared for competition or winning. Victory was necessary to keep you and those around you safe. It allowed you to earn respect. Zetsu felt different though. She didn't want to be scared of him or regret hiding behind someone else to deal with him.

She wanted to beat him right this time, and more than that, she was the only one who could see what lied within the stone. Slight certainly, but it provided an advantage in seeing where he would attack from.

Rukia gently rested her gleaming katana in the crook of her elbow and waited for her pursuers to come over the ridge. A part of her wanted Hinata to wait. Her Zanpakuto would dominate against plant and liquid. It could spare them a lot of time and risk.

However, she remembered the lesson taught to her by her captain the last time she wished to jump in and achieve an easy win.

Hinata's pride and confidence hinged upon confronting her killer alone. And, if absolutely necessary, she would intervene to save Hinata's life.

These two wouldn't take very long to deal with.

"Oh, one of them stayed behind?" The man with the facemask landed in front of her. "It's the one without the real prize though."

The scythe holder gurgled something harshly.

"I always do enjoy it when Jashin makes you silent." Black tendrils seeped out of his joints. "I suppose the more wins the better."

"You presume you have won?" Rukia smiled softly.

"Little girl, you can't kill an immortal - let alone two."

"Immortal?" The ground lightly quaked under Rukia's feet as it froze and cracked. "Then, unfortunately, Sode no Shirayuki will leave you with a very cruel fate."

Author's Notes:

My internet crapped out last night so I apologize for not getting this update then.

Including the Akatsuki was a decision I played back and forth with for a while. With the cast the story hosts, I needed more bad guys, but didn't want to make up a bunch of original characters or introduce characters from filler arcs or other series. I also wanted to give the trip into Hell some potency and needed another arc to truly flesh out the overall story. Coupled with some personal demons brought to life and new match ups, including them ultimately won over the feeling I was retreading old ground.

As an ironic little aside, I finished the rough draft of Rend the same day the final two chapters of the Naruto manga dropped. Typed out the closing line and then immediately dove into reading them. It may have been the sleep deprivation, but kind of a strange feeling.

Anyway, that's everything for today.

Next chapter will be on Saturday.

Deeper

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 15

Yamamoto craned his neck until it popped, rolling his chin forward out of the stretch. Sitting at a desk perched over papers always goaded his neck into aching even in youth. The ache only arrived quicker now, reminding him of his age, making the weight of his responsibilities heavier. He ignored it simply because his Ryujin Jakka continued to grow more powerful as did his reiatsu. They would continue to until they burned up together - the fate of a Shinigami not meeting their end on the battlefield. A soul's reiatsu and reiryoku strengthened until death, when its aged body no longer wanted to continue.

His nose wrinkled up at the untouched pile still on his desk - the latest batch of recruits presented by the academy to replace those lost in the attack. All of them were far too green. Being at least a year out from graduating at the earliest, the focus had shifted to the best of each class or those the instructors personally recommended as capable in real combat.

More meat to hoist into the grinder.

He never hesitated to send a Shinigami to their death if it benefited Soul Society as a whole. So was the responsibility, the duty, of the Gotei. However, it did not occur without all other options being exhausted. Shinigami did not die forgotten or on a whim, like these children would if he allowed them to wear the uniform. They suffered from incomplete training, with no experience from years of survival

and fighting in Rukongai, green with every denotation that word conveyed.

His other option would be to place the burden on those that currently remained, to let Aizen's forces whittle them down with each engagement. This last attack allowed the traitor to measure his manufactured army. They would be stronger, better, next time and kill many more Shinigami. They could not train hard enough to grow fast enough to keep pace with monsters that would be improved with each new iteration.

You could place them in the Dangai.

Gaara's suggestion carried an exceptional amount of risk, not merely due to those responsible for stabilizing the distortion, but also for the possible future. The idea of using the time delay within the passage to accelerate training was as old as its discovery. And yes, several who were responsible for cleaning that route thought they could do so without notice and were punished accordingly.

The problem that arose from such a… quick fix contrasted completely with the current issue of lacking experienced and powerful Shinigami. Strength meant everything in the Gotei 13. The strongest led, the rest followed by order. Diminishing that hierarchy potentially jeopardized the stability of Seireitei.

In its infancy, they were all equals. He and twelve others who laid claim to the title of strongest. That lasted all of an hour before infighting resulted in a bloody battle royal. With the democratic option a total failure, he had unleashed the full might of his Bankai, brining each of the others to their knees and forcing them to acknowledge him as both the party's founder and Commander.

It had been far from his first choice. Being raised behind the walls constructed by the Originator himself under the protection of his father and representatives from the noble houses, the peaceful life in Seireitei existed due to mutual cooperation. The only reason he knew of battle was because his father understood death would one

day come for him, and the bloody badlands that made up Rukongai needed to be held back and hollow needed to be purified.

He'd attempted to bring that same spirit to the first meeting of the Gotei 13. Yhwach built an army under his nose and neither the recruits in the Academy nor the coalition of Seireitei's residents could stand up against them. So, he set out and gathered the twelve strongest in Soul Society. Where the first generation of Shinigami, Oetsu the creator of Zanpakuto, Ichibei the name giver, Tenjiro the healer, Senjumaru the tailor, his father the first blessed by the Originator, and all their subordinates advocated peace, the second generation consisted of destructive murderous souls. With the original Shinigami sent to protect the Spirit King and his father passed, the criminals and warlords of the wastes were the only hope for victory.

He kept them reigned in by force. Some fell in the battle with the Quincy. Others, he personally executed or imprisoned in the end, like Mayuri Kurotsuchi. Only Unohana reformed - and that remained questionable at times. He'd intended to reinstitute his original design only for ego and greed to resurface time and again. After a while, it became more secure to simply adhere to the hierarchy. Over time, the Gotei became respected, adopted into Seireitei, and expanded into full companies rather than thirteen members. The power spread out evenly enough even a captain could potentially be dealt with by the rest.

Throwing everyone in the Dangai meant a little of his idealism crept to the surface, the naïve belief that things would turn out differently now. While Aizen did damage and would not be the last traitor, the core of the Gotei 13 remained strong. By everyone being on equal footing, the same could not be said. Certainly, superior stock would climb to the higher ranks, and theoretically, everything would remain intact.

Or he could simply not see threats prior to being fully matured.

I could send those three at least. They have proven to have strong character. The true question is what must be done to reduce the loss of life?

He absentmindedly signaled for a messenger.

"Have Gaara no Suna meet me at the training grounds with our Division's lowest seated officers. I want his expertise on team construction."

The messenger left in a silent Shunpo as a gentle breeze flowed in from the balcony. The familiar chime of a Jigokucho arrived in the ether. Holding his hand out, the little black butterfly landed delicately on his finger.

"Hoh, and who do you belong to?"

You see my dear, Inoue. This is the seed of a new existence.

"Aizen?"

I shall continue the tour of this Ark later. For now, I must tend to my growing army. I will have Ulquiorra escort you to your room.

The aged Shinigami scrutinized the tiny creature, releasing an easing pulse of reiatsu to unlock more of the creature's memories. A rapid flood of images filed into his mind. The troubled and now deceased Momo Hinamori confronting the traitor. Him callously extinguishing her life.

The kido spell that allowed this butterfly to listen in on their enemy.

"Well shi-"

Kisame gasped out the rest of his curse as Sado's fist buried itself in his gut and sent him flying deep into the cliff. Nel whooped in victory as the giant wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his

unequipped hand. The fight hadn't been going on very long so why was he sweating and winded?

"Hey, Chad has this sword gotten bigger?" Nel poked at Samehada's swelled form. "And I think it's moving."

Moving?

He'd known the sword was tough. The fight started with him using his ranged blast and the sword stopped every shot. Then, the fish guy dove for him, but his arm morphed into its shield version and knocked the strange blade away from it wielder, giving him a chance to use his bare hand to punch the man into the stone wall.

Nel squeaked as the sword furled up like a snake and loomed over her, mouth drooling and razor teeth reflecting the surrounding lava pools' gleam. She gasped as its scaled blades flared out. Sado rushed forward as her eyes widened.

I'm not going to make it!

"Puppy!" Sado tripped over his feet as she hugged the strange sword. Both the weapon and Sado looked equally confused as Nel began petting it. By some miracle, she remained uncut. The sword flopped onto what must have been its back so she could rub it belly. "Who's a good puppy?"

"Nel. That's not a dog."

"It's not?" She pulled away in shock and slowly looked over to its face. "What are you then?"

While eyeless, the sword stared back at her.

"Gi!"

"I see." She gripped it by the skull tipped handle and effortlessly hoisted it up in a mighty pose. "You are the sword dog, GiGi!"

"GiGiGi!"

Sado slowly scratched at his head as the blade curled around her protectively and gently placed its mouth over her mask. Nel giggled and swooned as if it massaged her scalp.

I suppose it does kind of act like a dog.

"Not this again, Samehada." The shark faced man crawled out of the artificial cave unharmed. "Ever since we bit it, you fawn over anyone you think can get you out of here. How's that supposed to make me feel, huh?"

The sword gibbered a few sounds and wound more protectively around Nel.

"I know things taste awful down here and how many times are you going to make me apologize for force feeding you all that demonic chakra? I know you got sick."

"You can speak with that?" Sado pointed over at Samehada. "Is it some kind of zanpakuto?"

"Samehada is a sentient sword that feeds off of energy. He always liked mine best, which is why we were partners for so long. Ever since we got killed by the eyebrow bastard, he's never forgiven me. I can't say I blame him. For a sword that actually has to eat energy to exist, this place, even my energy now, has to taste pretty rotten. Hell's the kind of place that corrodes you. It doesn't help he's lost his bloodlust - figures he can get out of here by being good, since he isn't chained like the rest of us."

"Gi!"

"Yeah, and if she's really that sweet, you'll get a stomach ache like with the Biju!" Kisame nonchalantly walked up to Sado, cracking his knuckles. "I guess he's going to sit this one out. Been a long, long time since I had to bring it down to an all out brawl."

Sado's right arm reverted to its offensive from and the two clashed in a contest of strength, grip against grip and push against push. Kisame shifted, pulling Sado down at an angle then delivering a swift and brutal kick to the side of his head. The bronze giant grunted, but his grip didn't loosen. The fish-man opened his mouth wide, exhaling a torrent of water and knocking Sado off his feet.

In a blur of movement, Kisame ran through a series of hand seals forcing the water to compress into an orb around Sado and seal him.

"Suiro no Jutsu."

Sado struggled to move and break free, but the liquid either bound or shifted with every movement. The initial attack had knocked the wind from his lungs and he never gained a chance to inhale. Already, his vision tunneled and the fatigue from earlier only sped up the process.

Clenching his left hand into a fist, white liquid armor bled out from the pores in his skin and encased his left arm from shoulder down. Energy crackled to life within his grasp, climbing and fighting harder against his fingers. Punching straight for Kisame's image, the water struggled to restrain him, only for the attack to ignite and blast the prison apart.

Sado swung with his devil arm, but Kisame deflected it and slammed a knee into exposed ribs. Shrugging off the hit, the Fullbringer slammed a right hook across the missing-nin's face. Kisame snatched the arm elbow to elbow, smashing his forehead into Sado's face and the latter quickly retaliating with a cross into the fish-man's gut. Twisting back in a reverse throw, Kisame followed the giant down with the point of his elbow, delivering a viscous blow onto Sado's chest.

Straining hard enough his veins traced under his armor, Sado pulled his ensnared arm between them, charged his fist, and unleashed a blast backed uppercut, knocking Kisame high into the air.

"Suiton." The ex-Kiri-nin vomited up a lake's worth of water then clapped his hands and shifted his fingers twice before stacking his palms and unleashing a giant shark of water straight for Sado. "Daikodan no Jutsu!"

Energy forming at his finger tips, Sado gripped his right fist as the shoulder extension on his right arm expelled blue flame. Flinging his arm forward a gigantic El Directo pierced the shark, only to fizzle out. The shark rained down undeterred, ravenously devouring the Fullbringer in a single terrifying chomp.

Kisame's shoulders slumped as fatigue hit him. That giant's first punch nearly did him in and probably would have if Samehada hadn't been leaching off of everyone since the standoff. One point in the benefit of afterlife energy flowing more freely than chakra. He'd been hit a lot in his life and non-life, but never had someone made him double over gasping for breath. Damn and he'd wanted to go right after fuzzy-brows too.

"Hey Samehada, give me a little pick me up. I don't care if you want to keep the pipsqueak around for entertainment." He slowly trudged up to his sword and its latest infatuation. "Sorry about your friend, pipsqueak, but them's the breaks-"

The giant's reiatsu surged beyond anything he'd demonstrated earlier. Suddenly, he appeared behind him and Kisame barely had the energy to spin around.

"What the hell happened-"

The right hand gripped the back of his head so tightly his skull groaned in protest as blue arcs of electricity coursed over the left hand.

"La Muerte."

Kisame couldn't even mumble a curse as the powered fist crashed into his face, driving his headless body down through the earth -

- The demonic skull pressing the corpse deeper into Hell.

Five minutes, fifteen minutes, thirty, Hinata continued to cautiously move within the descending tunnel of stairs. Vines and fauna covered every surface, scenting the stale air in a nauseating hint of acid. Heart hammering painfully against her chest, Hinata kept a serious expression on the surface - only the small beads of cold sweat on her brow betraying her calm. She hated this place. Small candles embedded in the walls eerily back lit the vines, casting shadows that disguised vines and roots.

It made everything seem like it was crawling.

"Girly, girly, not so little girl anymore, you finally made it!"

Even with expanded range and stretched out sweeps of her vision, Zetsu's physical body remained illusive. Now, the crazed half's voice carried around the stairway like it emanated from the plants them-

He couldn't have!

"Your heart rate changed pace." The lower and gruffer voice of the black half radiated in the same manner as his crazed counterpart. "So you realized we are no longer restrained to single form."

"This basically is our body now. You're inside us, girly!"

"Silence, fool."

I should have realized that sooner.

"The rumbling from earlier - I assume you have sealed off the exits." Hinata's voice remained neutral as she struggled to discern the chakra flow within the plant life.

"Very astute."

"The ice witch would have probably killed us. The cave in will slow her down for a while. You're here alone, girly, and you can't get out the other side either."

She shifted her vision further down the path. Sure enough, they'd blocked her in, using over a hundred feet of packed rubble reinforced with a sprawling vein of reiryoku reinforced roots. Were they that desperate to make sure she couldn't escape? Considering the distance to go, they couldn't possibly think she possessed the speed to make it out.

"Your heart shifted again and your breathing became lighter." Black Zetsu's face emerged out of a flytrap, the simple yellow eye boring down on her. "Yes, we waited until you reached the halfway point and blocked you in."

"No escape!" White Zetsu's face popped out beside her head. "You can't run. You can't hide. You can't kill us. Just die and let us eat you! I'm so hungry."

"Patience fool." Black Zetsu's face slid down the plant life until it leveled with her. "We eliminated every chance you may have had while simultaneously eliminating our weaknesses. You know what will happen if you cut us and you can't dig your way out fast enough to escape us."

"Why haven't you attacked me yet?"

"If I wanted my meals to struggle, I wouldn't waste time trying to find corpses."

"Killing something that fights back is a pain. We just want to feast, girlie!"

"You should know I don't give up."

"I can place a shoot right there." A black hand formed and pointed right between her eyes. "Painless and simple. You already know what the alternative feels like first hand."

"Acid ruins the flavor of good meat!"

She flicked her arm behind her, the fingertips brushing White's forehead and releasing a pulse of reiryoku into the plant system. Instantly, her energy halted his, neutralizing acid and life. It quickly eroded away as Zetsu's reiryoku from further in the system tore down the blockage.

"Thank you for silencing him, girl. Yet, you see it ultimately accomplishes nothing."

"While my eyes have changed and I never excelled at the style, I was still born a Hyuga and learned the basics of Juken. If I interrupt the flow of your energy, your attacks and your acid can't harm me."

"True, but you've seen how quickly your foreign energy dissipates in our network."

"Yes, and for a normal Hyuga, that would be fatal. However, I was once head of the clan and I am cursed."

The hyper-dense energy taught only to the leader of her family roared to life over her hands. The cursed reiryoku increased the potency, turning the electric blue into a shining violet that overpowered every other source of light within the tunnel. Sharp as her fathers, yet smoother like a flame, it tingled the nerves and nearly blinded her enhanced sight. Still, she didn't miss the plant system quickly contracting around her.

Telling Zetsu her plan had been a calculated risk. By sensing her reiatsu and knowing her skill set, he would understand leaving his power stretched out so thinly made it simple for her to section it off. Leaving it in place would protect him, by allowing his consciousness to remain out of reach. However, his only hope of defeating her, and

not facing Jashin's wrath, would be to consolidate the plants and acid, hoping to overpower her and drown her in it like last time.

Aside from a few specific attacks, she never truly gained masterful use of her family's greatest secret during their last fight. The majority of the short training saw to the development of her eyes and grasping the ability to merely create the condensed chakra. And out of apprehension and revilement, she'd refused to access the cursed chakra in her system.

Losing to the Earl changed that.

To break through the false body and strike the man underneath would require more than her standard powers. He outclassed her so badly she didn't have a choice but to fully develop all of her abilities - even those that formed a pit in her stomach and brought on nightmares in the beginning.

Flytraps and spear shaped reeds shot out from all directions simultaneously. Spinning on her toes while waving her hand in an arc, the trail of reiryoku shielded her from the attacks, snapping whatever struck and almost repelling it entirely. She struck out, injecting her energy into Zetsu's, the ferocious nature of it flooding and ravaging the network.

The echo of White's screaming reverberated throughout the hall as lifeless branches fell limply to the ground and withered. Like many other aspects of the aspects she'd adapted from the Juken, its gracelessness did not detract from the results.

"I have never seen a Hyuga do something like this." Repressed pain laced every syllable of Black's voice. "What is this?"

"The most basic concept of Juken, placing my energy within you to create internal damage." She flipped with a spin as another barrage attempted to skewer her. "You possessed an insurmountable about of chakra in our last encounter. Now, either you have lost that power, or I have found a way to overcome it."

She punched into the stone wall and struck a major artery. The reiryoku nearly recoiled as hers ruined the pathway and surged into the system. Barbaric, by traditional terms, using Juken this way would have garnered so much protest from those bound by custom over function. Ironic that the idea came from watching her father. The man crushed boulders with the waves of chakra he conjured. Once, as a little girl, she'd spied him crushing the bones and shredding the heart of a Kumo-nin they'd captured with barely a touch on the shoulder. In the journal left by her mother, she'd stated Hiashi constantly reigned in his naturally powerful chakra to adhere to Juken tenets.

Doesn't it seem unintelligent, it read. *Why our chakra released externally is supposed to cause extreme destruction, but that same principle isn't allowed to be applied internally? I understand that most don't have the power to do so, but for someone like Hiashi-kun, why limit him for the sake of uniformity?*

A dozen enormous flytraps tore out of the walls, acid dripping from furled back teeth. White's portion of Zetsu's face emerged with a crazed sneer.

"Let me feed!"

She slammed her charged palm square into his deranged face. The force blasted back the remaining plants and shutdown his entire half of the network. Roots wrapped up her legs and torso as more tethers dropped from the ceiling, tying her arms into place. The bindings pulled tight and all motion ceased.

"You can doubtlessly escape, but you know the cost." The entirety of Black's half seeped out of the floor. "Those vines will douse you the instant you cut free, not that I will wait that long." More heads emerged and began snapping and tearing at each other, acid spraying from the wounds. "That terrifying energy of yours has wracked my system like poison, cutting the leaves off from the stem's nutrition. I can't even meld back into it anymore. Besides, if I ran, Jashin would easily use his chains to rip me out of wherever I

hid and punish me for failing. There is no escaping the master of this place."

"So you'll die instead of facing him?"

"In Hell, death means you turn to dust for a while and then reform in the future. How long you mercifully remain as dirt depends on power, will, and God's cruel sense of justice. If I die, I will return the same as I am bound to this place and Jashin. Killing you means he will set me free of that. Killing you means you become bound to this place."

"If I die in Hell, I remain in Hell?"

"Yes." His face started to slough off as her reiryoku overpowered his chakra. "You possess so much more power than before, and yet, it ends the same. We reach a stalemate. You kill me and acid dissolves you into nothingness."

"This won't end the same." Her reiatsu flared out into a violet aura, pushing away the plants that bound her. "Soudai Kaiten!"

With a single spin, the aura solidified into a solid sphere of tightly compressed reiryoku as acid waves washed against the new barrier. Crossing her forearms in front of her, she pushed more power into her palms and sunk into a low stance. Zetsu watched in horror as her spiritual power climbed higher. The protective orb cracked, and with a shout, she flung her hands out to the sides.

"Shugohakke Kuhekisho!"

Waves of pure reiryoku, encased in a hyper-dense shell, shot out, dispersing the acid and crumpling Black into mush. It gouged out a wider walkway as the attack flew up and down the stairs. The glow of her technique faded, allowing darkness to encroach her.

She stood there for a moment. The twinge of the raw nerves in her skin, the stale taste of ragged breathing, the subtle shake of her

outstretched arms, and a million other little things of her stressed body slowly brought a small smile to her lips.

She was alive!

No, more than that. She was unharmed and had won; no sacrifices, or eked out victories.

"Thank you, Dad, Mom."

"Wha- what's going on?"

Naruto stared in a mixture of confusion and sorrow as Sakura's emerald eyes smiled back compassionately. Sasuke scowled off to his right as the pink-haired woman stood and nearly skipped to a spot between them. Folding her hands behind her, she leaned forward like so many times in the past. That weightless happiness she radiated simply because everyone returned home safe.

"You still don't catch on quick do you, Naruto?" Her voice came out teasingly. "Sasuke used the diversion from your friend to get away from Jashin. He gave us a chance to reunite Team 7."

"Why are you here, Sakura-chan?"

"What do you mean?"

"You shouldn't be." Naruto took a haunted step closer. "Someone like you shouldn't be in a place like this."

Sadness tugged at her smile as she cast her gaze to the ground.

"You really are too kind, Naruto." She collected herself. "I made mistakes. My cruelty to you, betraying my village, those things stack up after a while."

His eyes welled up as she slowly wrapped him into a hug.

"It's okay. I know it is a lot to take in."

"I'm sorry, Sakura-chan." The tears trickled freely down his cheeks. "I couldn't protect you. I couldn't save Sasuke or keep my promises."

Her mannerisms and expressions, the changes in her voice and even her scent were exactly like he remembered. It dredged up those heart-wrenching last moments in the hospital. The fear and pain that leaked over a brave face as the poison seeped into her clammy sweat.

That final punctuating breath and how it echoed throughout the hall like breaking glass.

"You don't have to worry about that anymore. I've helped Sasuke see what he did was wrong and he's been pretending to be Jashin's ally so we can find a way to escape. Now with both of you here, the three of us can get out of here easily."

This can't be real

He tried to push her away.

"I have to go help Ichigo."

"You don't have to do anything anymore." She leaned back enough to cup his cheek in her palm. "Our entire team was sacrificed for everyone else's convenience once. We should come first this time. Don't you think so, Naruto?"

"I'm not leaving Hinata and the others."

She slugged him in the same cheek she had just caressed, her trademark scowl bubbling to the surface as he fell to the ground.

"Damn it, Naruto. Stop being such an idiot!" She waggled her finger at him. "Hinata is strong enough to take care of herself and so are the others. Besides, I was dead serious when I said I messed up letting someone else be your girlfriend. You really think our history

together should play second to some random girl? Or are you just determined to abandon this team again?"

This isn't right.

He rubbed his cheek and slowly climbed to his knees.

"Sakura, Hinata isn't some random girl. You know how hard she worked and how strong she became."

"She's not me!"

A Chidori burst from her stomach, the crackling lighting sizzling away the blood. Her eyes widened in horror as she slowly slumped to the ground.

"You're annoying." Sasuke retracted his arm from her as his Sharingan bared down. "Even as an illusion."

Naruto could only stare as his teammate collapsed entirely. She never looked away from him or with anything other than confusion and hurt. It was the same damn look as last time.

"All you had to d- do was choose Team 7… your team." Her eyes watered as they glassed over. "Na- Naru - to, how could you let this happen again? Why am I always punished for being your second choice?"

Even without Sasuke's confirmation, Naruto knew he'd been caught in some kind of genjutsu. The inconstancies of his surroundings and the gnawing feelings in his gut told him something was off. It still ripped the same emotions out of him. Past and present blurred together as strangling grief froze him in time.

"Pay attention!" Sasuke kicked him in the chest hard, making the blonde roll back twice before crashing into a large rock. "You think this will sate me? I intentionally left openings for you to recognize this genjutsu and escape. Even as a pathetic loser, you should have

been able to do this much. I won't accept this! My hatred for you won't be quenched if the image of a dead girl can defeat you!"

He brought his foot up and stomped. Again and again as bone's cracked and joints buckled, Sasuke trampled him. Naruto didn't really feel it as his focus remained glued on Sakura as her life faded away.

"Both you and that pathetic chakra-less loser only won because you tricked me. You never beat me. He never beat me. You used stupid tricks, and then like a coward, you killed me, Naruto!" Sasuke grabbed him by the collar of his orange jacket and hoisted him up while punching down. "You robbed me of everything! My revenge, my dreams of carrying on the Uchiha legacy, you ruined it all. All that talk of saving me and friendship and returning to the village, you sounded so noble and it was all a lie to disguise how jealous you were of me."

Sasuke's hand crunched with a final slam, but he still joined the other hand in tightly clutching Naruto's jacket. Anguish and rage marred his failures as he shook the nearly catatonic blonde.

"Before that fool Madara was imprisoned, he told me about what happened with Itachi. Why he killed our clan and how he ultimately died." Sasuke scrunched his eyes as tears pricked at their corners. "He died saving you. Why? Why did he do that? He'd completed his mission and lost faith in the village. He never hesitated in cutting down even the children of our clan. So why did he do that… for you? Wh -y didn't he save me?"

Naruto still didn't look away from Sakura's still form.

"Look at me!"

Sasuke formed the tiger seal and blew a fireball into his palm. Flinging it at Sakura, the ball exploded on contact, tossing the body away and obscuring it in smoke.

Naruto saw red.

Four tails of pure reiryoku emerged behind Naruto as the full fox cloak enveloped him. A fifth tail joined the rest and the world around them unraveled. Bones snapped into place as wounds seared shut. His skin burned off, blood mixing with chakra and granting the form its trademark dark red shell.

The genjutsu completely fell apart, revealing a blackened landscape stained from ash. Rivers of dark orange lava flowed unceasingly between the tall cliffs they stood upon. Gnarled dead trees dotted the cliffs and plateaus, each petrified branch unmoving with the clouds of lazily churning ash.

Naruto didn't care where the hell he stood.

Lunging for Sasuke with a scream of primal rage, Naruto pounced on the Uchiha as he summoned a current of lighting around his body. Unfazed, the Jinchuriki tore at his former friend without a shred of remorse.

Kill him

Sasuke formed a Chidori and stabbed into Naruto's chest. The possessed blonde howled in pain, but bore down on clenched teeth, a ball of black demonic energy forming in his mouth as he lowered it in front of the Uchiha's face.

A chain soared through air and choked out the attack as it tied around Naruto's throat. The Jinchuriki lurched back and clawed at the leash, but it merely tightened and the master on the other end tugged roughly, forcing him to come to heel.

"Did you have fun catching up with your friend, Sasuke?" Jashin whipped the chain down so Naruto's face buried in the dirt. "It is good for children to work out their problems."

The Uchiha picked himself up and calmly dusted the stray ash from his clothes.

"I would have managed him easily if you'd allowed me to restrain his power with my Sharingan." A sneer marred his features. "And I would have rather engaged him directly instead of playing around with a stupid genjutsu."

"And that is why foolish little boys should listen to their elders." Jashin placed his foot on top of the back of Naruto's skull, snuffing out the fox ears. "His demonic power manifests parallel to his anger. Letting him remain in control or repressing that energy would be counterintuitive. It isn't like you posses the raw power to break out of here. You were completely outclassed by a mere five tails."

"I would have won if I utilized my true power. You should have let me kill him and then you could have controlled him easily."

"I have learned to orchestrate the chains at will. This is true. You forget, however, this place remains their true creator and I cannot release souls bound by them. Otherwise, my young friend, I would have left here ages ago." Jashin stepped down harder as Naruto growled. "In this state, neither the fox nor Naruto himself have any control. It is merely the feral nature of the demonic energy that drives him. It is easy enough to tame using my personal chains to link our reiatsu and overpower him."

"If you can overpower him so easily, why don't you break the chains yourself?"

"Those already bound by Hell's chains cannot break them, and as for this beast, it will be easy to draw out more tails. As long as they are bound to my reiatsu, I have complete control over these mindless animals." Jashin looked over his shoulder with a smirk as another presence joined them. "They truly are impressive pets when you bring them together."

Deathly white with black tattoos, the skin overlaying a lean muscular torso sharply contrasted with the tattered remains of the Shihakusho. The familiar mask had fully encased Ichigo's head and developed a jagged mouth of its own, leading up to two bladed horns jutting forward from the sides of the head. Hip length orange hair spooled out the back and swayed alongside tuffs of red fur within the thermals of the lava below.

The midnight black daito version of Zangetsu was clutched tightly in its clawed grip.

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40 MINUTES EARLIER

It felt like they'd been falling for hours. A brief clash, a few sparks to illuminate the bottomless pit, and then more falling. The ground had opened up into sky once, providing a vast desert of gray sand and an altar of skulls on the horizon. Jashin quickly opened another hole before reaching the ground and the descent continued.

Naruto disappeared from his sight shortly after that along with the angry one.

Leaving only him and an always smiling Jashin.

"Have you enjoyed your last moments of conscious thought, young man?" Jashin lazily twisted around as the wind whipped his hair around. "We will reach Hell's final level in a few minutes, and before you strike earth, you will have become my subservient monster."

"Kind of getting ahead of yourself aren't you?"

Ichigo grinned and readied his sword for another attack. If that bastard thought his Getsuga Tensho wasn't any different in his Bankai, he was in for a rude awakening. Naruto had stepped up their training over the past few weeks and included refining his power in this state. The only reason why he hadn't unleashed a blast yet was because Naruto might have gotten hit.

He wasn't around now.

Pushing his reiryoku out his feet, Ichigo formed a temporary platform and sprang up to Jashin. He lashed out in a calculated barrage of slashes. Dozens of strikes a second nicked flesh as Jashin struggled to keep up defensively. Yet, the strange man never seemed uncomfortable or worried. He was outclassed, that wasn't arrogance but obvious. So why did he look like he didn't care?

"My, my you are certainly quicker now and the strength of your blows is very good. Good, a spry young man should be able to outpace his elders. However." Jashin tipped his blade, hooking one of its teeth on Ichigo's daito and trapping it in place. "Experience always wins out."

"Getsuga." Black energy outlined in red ignited at the end of Zangetsu. "Tensho!"

The attack blasted Jashin back, carving out cavernous trenches in the chasm's opposing wall. Ichigo only grinned for moment when he instinctually gagged. A thick oily substance crept up his throat and coated his insides. Grabbing his mouth as another wretch shook him, liquid bone spewed out from between his fingers and instantly grafted to the left side of his face.

I know this feeling.

"Were you not warned about the effects of Hell on hollow powers, young man?" Jashin floated out of the fog, singed and scuffed, but largely unharmed. "Or did you think you could control it."

"I-" Another glob vomited up from his lungs crept up the remaining side. "Why didn't I feel it coming on?"

"Your Bankai, and that frightening attack of yours, draw out an enormous amount of power. You can only drink from the top layer of a pond for so long before the muck gets dredged up."

Ichigo ripped off a chunk and brought his guard up. Getting worked up wouldn't help things. Suppressing his inner hollow wasn't anything new. He'd just have to rely on physical attacks… like stabbing. He had a slight enough advantage Jashin would eventually leave an opening. He needed to be patient.

"Tell me, young man. Do you posses the high speed regeneration of a hollow?"

"What?"

Black shoots speared out of the teeth on Jashin's sword, bowing in like a rib cage for Ichigo. The Substitute vanished in a Shunpo. The developing edge of his mask wiggled hungrily toward his eye. He quickly clawed it away and went to counterattack, but Jashin already hovered above him. The tendrils rushed him again and sparked violently as he deflected them. Almost instantly, they changed direction and boxed around him in a thick layer of ice, forming cage walls.

"We have reached our destination, and as I said, you will not touch ground without being tamed."

Ichigo stared down in horror as lava churned beneath him, splashing against the obsidian cliffs like burning hands. Jashin severed the technique from his sword and Ichigo felt weightlessness take hold. In slow motion, his prison dragged him down to the burning lake as Jashin smiled mirthlessly.

The cage submerged completely, trapping Ichigo in a world of orange for only the briefest of seconds before the liquid fire came for him. It struck so quickly he thrashed out of instinct and terror rather than any sensation his crisped nerves produced. A scream only gave another opportunity for the magma to eat away at him, pouring down his throat and melting away his insides to nothing.

His reiatsu swelled as he surfaced with a bestial roar, the lava parting as his mask fully encapsulated his blackened head and

hollow white bled over the charred remains of his human tissue. Still the power climbed, toppling cliffs and casting the inferno away in waves as the roar shifted into a nightmarish screech.

And Jashin clapped.

"Konoha Kaigansho!"

Lee slammed a reinforced elbow directly into Sasori's chest. The human puppet slid back as cracks formed in his torso. Lee flipped in the air, bringing his leg crashing down on the incredulous skull. Spinning blades unsheathed themselves from the living doll's forearms, but the taijutsu master knocked them away with his gauntlets. Landing low, he reared back as fire coated his fist. "Yakedo Konoha Ya!"

With all of his bodyweight behind the lightning fast punch, the strike punctured Sasori's chest, the fire drilling and eating away whatever it touched. Lee leapt back as the puppet belched up a plume of poison.

"I believed this work of art would have been truly eternal." Sasori grumbled as he removed a scroll from a compartment in his hollowed out right leg. "Kushanada bones are not supposed to break."

"Your body is made from Hell's guardians?"

"Carving them to shape became the most difficult task I ever experienced. Their fresh bones never crack, never deteriorate in any way, and now you've put a hole in one. It is disappointing." He unfurled the scroll, summoning a thousand corpses brandishing crude handmade weapons. "Akahigi: Hyakki no Soen."

Pale skin stretched tightly over gaunt faces. Unnerving stares from a thousand pairs of crazed bloodshot eyes sent a chill down Lee's spine as realization sunk in.

They're still alive.

"Hell is an interesting place. Its residents would rather become conscious marionettes under my control than face the punishment of the Kushanada. And because everything destroyed resets to the same state, my art is genuinely everlasting, making this place a paradise to me in many ways." He tore off a piece of his chest and reiryoku threads erupted out, latching onto the waiting servants. Sasori pursed his lips together in an unstably amused smile. "And you went and damaged my greatest masterpiece."

Lee frowned and brought an open hand out in front of him while placing the other in the small of his back. The glimmer of tiny droplets of poison clung to the edges of each weapon. Even with the advantage of speed and strength, he admittedly could not rival Sasori's strategy. All it would take is a single scratch and the fight would be over. Releasing the fifth gate would surely allow him to quickly evade the army and take down the puppeteer directly, but Sasori would likely still be able to react quickly enough to use his technique as a toxic shield. A higher gate would rectify that, but it would leave him exhausted even with the soothing effects of the mixture on his hip. Not wanting to rest in such an un-youthful place aside, his friends needed him in fighting shape.

If I keep Sokyoku's flames at maximum, it should prevent those weapons from touching me.

He took a sip from his flask and put it back.

"Yosh! Seimon open!" His armor ignited as the third gate within him opened. "Yakedo - Konoha Kongoriki Senpu."

Lee spun forward, his shin driving across four of the legion and sending them flying back into the mass as a fiery wave. The flames from his gauntlets swelled, reaching from fingertip to shoulder, and blocked his attackers from both sides. He vaulted over a stab and sprung from marionette to marionette toward Sasori.

The puppeteer hopped back and a wall of troops took his place. Lee grabbed the closest one and flung him to the side then quickly swept another. They continued to pile on as he flowed between takedowns and throws. The soldiers remained unharmed, but were forced to weave around one another to get to him. He flipped off a pair of shoulders, landing softly on a cliff overlooking the tangled mass of puppets.

"Foolish boy, I am Sasori of the Red Sand. Do you think a few knotted strings will hinder me?" The redhead gripped the threads in a fist and twisted, forcing the army into an orb that swung high above. "Akahigi: Kugutsu Ame."

The subservient souls screamed as weapons tore out from their flesh and joints segmented. Lee's eyes widened as they continued to separate into a horrid mass of bladed body parts. Sasori's reiatsu soared as red reiryoku climbed the strings into the sphere and blew it apart.

Lee sprinted for the puppeteer as the death shards rained down. Sokyoku would not be able to shield him from that many strikes. The fire would either be too small and not block everything, or it would be too thin and the attacks would break through. It appeared Sasori could also continue directing them even after they fell. Sakura-chan's report from her encounter with the missing-nin stated his heart was housed in his chest and the only means of defeating him.

He had delivered lethal damage to that area and found nothing.

"Shomon open!" Lee's speed quickened in mid step, allowing him to evade certain impalement.

"No matter how much your speed increases, your target does not change. It makes it easy to predict where you will strike." Spikes expanded from his rib cage and he pulled himself in. "You will add a great deal of quality to my puppet collection."

The threads walled either side of him, forcing the parts to surround him as Sasori flew at him. Lee had struck powerful blows against the chest and head. The arms and right leg were compartments housing weapons and scrolls. The left leg remained the only uncertainty.

"Akahigi: Chimeiteki Houyou."

"Konoha Reppu!"

Lee dropped into a low spinning kick, shattering his opponent's left leg. He flipped back onto his hands and kicked the stalling puppet's chin, launching the bone corpse overhead along with the dying technique. The taijutsu master bounced off his hands and stomped down with both feet on the detached foot, crushing Sasori's heart as the technique's remains collapsed to the ground.

"I apologize for stomping on you, Sasori-san. However, I cannot risk you reassembling and interfering in my next fight." Lee's face hardened into an uncharacteristic glare. "The Uchiha is strong enough that crushing him will take all my focus."

He powered down from the fourth gate and quickly stretched the tension out of his muscles. Gathering the others took first priority. Karin mentioned before hiding she had acclimated to the suffocating atmosphere enough to find everyone. At least, on this level. She could not sense anything from the lower levels.

"Lee!" Karin leapt up over the cliff. He quickly dove across the puppet remains and caught her. "What are you-"

"Everything is coated in poison. I didn't want to risk you getting hurt."

"Oh." She blushed. "Hinata and Rukia's signatures have disappeared. Nel is still with Sado. Uryu is still dealing with his opponent and they keep getting farther away."

"Let us reunite with Sado-kun and Nel-chan first."

"Okay… you want to tell me why seeing Sasuke-kun has flung your energy into a negative state?"

"I had hoped our last encounter would have been the final one. Naruto-kun was forced to finish the traitor, an act I know hurt him. I do not want my friend to be forced into that again, nor do I want his kindness exploited by the Uchiha."

Karin shoved herself out of Lee's arm and landed on the ground as her face scrunched up in anger.

"Why are you talking about Sasuke like he's some monster? I know he left your village, but he had his reasons. He-"

"Sasuke Uchiha tried to kill Naruto-kun on three different occasions. He left Sakura-chan to die an excruciating death, because according to him, it did not concern him. For three years, she dreamed of bringing the traitor back. Neither she nor Naruto ever gave up on him. They always considered him a true friend who would return to them if shown enough kindness."

"I'm not saying he hasn't made bad choices, but there had to have been more to it than that Lee. The Sasuke-kun I knew had problems and made mistakes. You would too if the person you looked up to the most killed your entire family! But he isn't some remorseless killer. He doesn't deserve you talking about him like he's beyond redemption or compassion!"

"You saw him up on that cliff staring down at us. You are the sensor type, Karin-san. Are you saying all the anger and hate he displayed wasn't real?" His fist clenched at his side as the final moments with Sakura played out in his mind. "I found her lying on the floor of the room he left. Abandoned and scared, all she could gasp out was why. Why? Even if he did not want to return to the village, he did not have to hide her away alone and suffering." Karin's face fell as his eyes watered. "I tracked him down and fought him. You say he isn't a remorseless killer, but his dismissal of his actions, the arrogant

justification that basic humanity did not apply to an avenger like him, how is that anything other than remorseless, Karin?"

"Sasuke-"

"Discarded Sakura like a broken tool. His pain, his goals, his family name, he always felt they justified any action he took, embodying every trait I ever associated with the Uchiha Clan."

"You sound like you hate the entire clan, not just Sasuke."

"I will admit, only meeting Sasuke, and experiencing Madara's plot has unfortunately made me quite negative about the Uchiha Clan in its entirety. All I know of them is their unworldly talent, their arrogance, the evil brought about by their Sharingan, how everything seems handed to them while they simply lift their noses like they deserve more. It is wrong of me not to recognize that there are many others within that family who possessed better qualities as people. Calling Sasuke, the Uchiha, or, an Uchiha, disrespects those unlike him. I need to do better than make unfair assumptions, because I have no right to hate someone I have never met."

"But Sasuke is different."

"Sasuke is beyond saving and I will not allow him to exploit the pity and compassion of others. If that makes you or Naruto or anyone else hate me… then, that is how it will have to be." Lee pressed his forearm over his eyes. "I won't let him - I won't let Sasuke keep hurting everyone."

His tears dampened the bandages around his arms. The idea of everyone turning away from him hurt. It hurt so badly, but he needed to endure it. Naruto, for all his anger, still deep down considered Sasuke his best friend. He would still try to reach him. He had failed Naruto once by not killing Sasuke before the blonde was forced to. He had failed Sakura by being silent, instead of convincing her to stop chasing after the traitor.

Karin gently wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled herself tightly against him.

"I don't think it's possible to hate you, Rock Lee. I'm sorry for not wanting to admit what I saw inside him." She tugged his arm down with a smile. "Just, don't let your own anger drag you down to his level. Protect us, but do it as my Lee."

"Karin-san." He sniffed and dried his face. "Thank you."

"Enough of this Karin-san stuff." She elbowed him lightly in the gut. "My future boyfriend doesn't need to be so formal with me"

Why does he keep rubbing his neck like he's surprised it's there?

Uryu loosed another dozen arrows, piercing the small clay bombs and forcing them to explode early. Ashamedly, it took a few close calls for him to recognize that they would only explode when his opponent made a strange hand sign, or that he could do the same by aggravating the internal reishi with his own attacks.

It should have been simple to end the fight quickly, but his opponent continued to use his bombs to keep distance and divert his arrows' path. The timing and mastering to instantly redirect a sure kill shot was as annoying as it was respectable. It'd turned the entire fight into a methodical chess match, making each exchange a subtle test of who possessed the greatest mastery at long range.

It didn't help the blast kept him from changing up the fight to a close range engagement. Although, if he were honest, his pride as a Quincy wouldn't allow him to be defeated in projectile combat.

"It is rude to revise a master's art, yeah?" The blonde man smirked down from the back of his clay bird. "Acting so cool and collected, you're a frustrating one."

Uryu didn't avert his gaze, but he knew exactly what the bomber was talking about. He'd sensed something moving rapidly underground, and with a little test absorption, discovered the same explosives he kept shooting down were being used as landmines. It had been simple to evade by forming a thin platform under his feet to float over the threats.

"I believe I'm the one who should be saying that." Uryu pulled back on his bow and formed a highly detailed arrow. "You keep trying to trick me by having some of your statues charged and others harmless clay. I will simply continue shooting them all down regardless, but the stray blast is dragging this out longer than it should."

Deidara lobbed a few more bombs and Uryu shattered them with a single shot.

More duds.

"You're naïve if you believe that any of my works are anything but explosive."

Deidara formed a hand seal and the small lumps of inactive clay detonated in front of his face. Uryu zipped away, but the crumbs of clay that had accumulated on his reishi platform exploded as well, tossing him high into the air. He rapidly fired a few shots into the ground, setting off the landmines below.

He crashed into the crater as chunks of stone and dust fell around him. The attack hadn't taken off his feet, but it would hinder his mobility.

"You think you are the only one intelligent enough to realize how to set off my clay?" Deidara's bird flapped over the edge of the crater as Uryu struggled to stand. "I prefer that method because it responds faster and is more in line with my artistic tastes. However, it is simple to keep them entirely dormant until I choose otherwise."

His hand spit up a large clay doll and he dropped it over the edge. "You should have listened to the nine tails."

Uryu used a quick Hirenkyaku to escape as the pit exploded. Yanking one of the thin silver hilts from his belt, a light blue blade of pure reishi surged to life and he fired directly into the bird. It popped and Deidara landed softly on the ground.

"Again you assume my art is something generic and predicable. A different arrow requires a different response."

"As I'd hoped."

Uryu yanked on the incredibly thin strand of reishi cord he'd attached to the Seele Schneider, forcing the unique arrow to return to his hand. Stabbing it into the ground, he retrieved a small tube from his pocket and poured the liquid content onto the hilt. A shockwave of reiryoku pulsed through ground, detonating all of the landmines and launching the newly created platform under his feet into the air.

"Thank you for giving me the reishi necessary to neutralize your atta-"

Uryu's proclamation withered as Deidara made a hand seal as the small clay spider crawled up from his back on to his shoulder. It made a small explosion, nearly amputating the Quincy's right shoulder and blasting him back into the sandy ground. He quickly stumbled to his knees as he stitched reishi threads down his arm so he could control it mentally.

"Game over." Deidara's grin intensified. "You've already inhaled my C4."

"What?"

"You fell on my doll without realizing it. When it ruptures, it releases bombs smaller than the eye can see. Those bombs are now in your bloodstream. Now, enjoy my finest art."

Uryu activated Blut: Vene as Deidara triggered his attack. The Quincy felt his defensive technique struggle to contain the microscopic explosions within the walls of his fortified veins. Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth, but the protection held back the last of the detonations.

"You bastard! How dare you ruin my masterpiece!"

Clouds of sand and smoke blasted into existence as Deidara let loose with a barrage of bombs. The din went higher, completely engulfing Uryu and everything around him. The bomb-user created a large statue and summoned a small clay bird to carry it over the smoke and drop it like a bomber.

The mushroom cloud pushed the sand back a mile in each direction as the missing-nin laughed and stretched his arms wide, soaking in the shockwave as it violently whipped his clothes around.

"Leuchtend Heilig Pfeil."

A shining arrow, parting the sand with its very wake, streaked out of the destructive cloud and vaporized Deidara's right shoulder. He scowled and prepared another bomb in his good arm.

"You are a stubborn one." Something caused the upper reaches of the smoke to swirl. "Escaping high, yeah? How predicatab-"

Uryu slid up beneath him and fired another arrow straight into his chin, completely eradicating the artists head. The body tumbled back into the sand as Uryu's chest heaved and sweat soaked his smoke stained suit.

"I told you. Shooting down your bombs was simple." He attempted to stand, but simply fell to his side. "In the end, you were the one who made assumptions."

The Quincy coughed up a lungful of smoke and crimson. The world around him swam as his body became numb.

Then, everything went dark.

Karin gasped and froze in her tracks as Nel rode the strange sword like a surfboard.

"Karin-san?" Lee paused and glanced over his shoulder worriedly. "What's wrong?"

"Uryu's signature disappeared just now." Her brow furrowed and she placed her fingertips to her forehead. "No, it's flickering. He has to be hurt - badly."

"Then, let us go to him quickly!"

"No, you need to keep heading for the stairway." Karin moved ahead of the group. "Samehada should be able to track them from there. The reiatsu Jashin unleashed on us is only a portion of his real strength. Naruto and Ichigo are going to need help if they have to fight both him and Sasuke. I'm the only one who can find Uryu if he is fading so all you would be doing is following me around."

"Alright." Sado scooped up Nel and made his way for the stairs. "Nel?"

"Okay! Samehada find them, boy?"

"Gi!"

The trio raced off as Lee stayed behind for a moment. He grasped her hands, making her heart skip a beat.

"Be safe, Karin-chan."

"I will." She pulled away with a grin. "Go kick some ass."

"Yosh!"

He took off after the group and quickly sunk into the stone horizon. She exhaled slowly and faced the barren expanse of rocky crags and bubbling pools of lava. What was she thinking facing this by herself? What if another of those Kushanada things appeared?

She scratched at her head furiously. What if the group needed her to heal them during the fight? Lee's energy had stabilized, but would stay that way after meeting Sasuke? Seeing him normally so gentle and kind, it sacred her that her former crush was so terrible it brought out such powerfully negative feelings in Lee. Despite embracing Lee and taking his side, she still had reservations about his words. It wasn't that she didn't believe him and any feelings for Sasuke had dissipated as she became closer to Lee. It was just… sad to think that is what that lonely boy with the cool smirk became. It made her question what could have happened to snuff out that kindness she once sensed in his chakra.

No, those things needed to be put away. Whatever took him from avenger to monster was irrelevant. He wanted to hurt them. He was an enemy.

She felt Lee's presence fade into the lower levels.

"Please, be safe."

She straightened up and focused toward the last place she felt Uryu.

She'd wondered what it would be like to stand face to face with him. Would she ask questions or be filled with hate? He provided a single source to focus her worries. He embodied everything that reviled her about her own changes. Would defeating him somehow put her at ease? Would it mean she fully overcame the path Danzo forced her on?

"I see Danzo managed to track his way to my primary lab." Orochimaru stood atop a dome of ashen sand twenty feet outside the stairway exit. "It appears you not only survived, but acclimated to

the modifications completely. Your body is superior to any I have claimed, child."

She instantly went on edge and sunk into a fighting stance. He merely chuckled in his distinctive way and strolled down the dune. Activating her vision, she made sure he didn't have a trap underground as he approached her.

"You've even mastered the senjutsu our bodies naturally harness without the natural energy overcoming you." He stopped in front of her with a gleefully maniacal grin. "Were this our previous life, I likely would have taken over your body and simply transplanted Sasuke's eyes."

"And now?"

"As a resident of Hell, I'm functionally immortal." A Sharingan flared to life in his right eye as a Rinnegan appeared in his left. "And Jashin was kind enough to give me Madara's eyes in exchange of no longer pursuing Sasuke. The infamous Uchiha never did realize that by becoming the Sage of the Six Paths, he merely needed to halt the flow of demonic chakra for his eyes to revert back to their original form."

She needed to strike him now while he underestimated her. From the notes they recovered in Oto, Tsunade-sensei deduced Orochimaru's head would be his only weakness outside of complete destruction. The churning mess of snakes comprising him would heal any other form of attack.

"You can relax, child. I have no interest in Jashin's little game."

"Why?"

His eyes flickered with an insane gleam.

"In my previous life, I desired to become an ultimate being, an immortal that could seek out all ninjutsu. I have the first part, and

with all the wealth of knowledge in this place, I am in no rush to escape back to our original world. Why stop at just ninjutsu when I have an eternity to learn everything? Besides, many residents of our world are now housed in Hell and many performed jutsu long forgotten or never even revealed. It will take me a millennia to sort through everyone already in Hell. How many more years will I have as newcomers fall into this abyss? It is so much more convenient having them come to me here, than trying to hunt them there."

She relaxed slightly as his doujutsu faded back to their regular snake-styled state.

"Why are you here?"

"While I never had direct involvement, you are still a product, no, the crowning achievement my experiments painstakingly crafted. I just wanted to see you up close, especially knowing you defeated Zetsu and proved you have surpassed me." He pointed at a trail winding between more sand domes and hills. "At the end of that path is an altar. Behind that, you will find another pit leading to the final level where Jashin resides. He's placed Naruto-kun and that other boy under his control in their monstrous states."

"Why?"

"By having so much power, but not being chained to Hell, they will likely be able to break the chains that bind all of us to this plane." Orochimaru slowly slid into the ground. "I will find my own way out in time. When I next appear, be a thousand years or a million, I hope you little Konoha-nin will still exist. I would love to see how my ultimate knowledge stands against the boy who brought the Nine Tails to heel and the girl who achieved what I could not."

He fully disappeared, lower and lower until he left her range.

"He is a strange man." Rukia sheathed her Zanpakuto as she walked up behind Hinata. "So, Ichigo fully succumbed to his inner-hollow. This will make things very difficult and far more dangerous."

"How powerful is he, Rukia-san?"

"I know his mask is only a percentage of the hollow's true power, and that has yielded powerful results."

She frowned as she deactivated her vision. If Naruto lost control, the fox's power would easily eclipse any one of them. Sasuke, Jashin, and possibly other opponents would diminish the benefit they had in terms of numbers. Their best chance would be to free Naruto and Ichigo simultaneously and escape. Hopefully, the tracker would still be working even in Ichigo's transformed state.

"We should keep moving and find out what we'll be up against. We can rescue them after the others catch up."

"Agreed."

Author's Notes:

I found these fights to be fun, albeit it challenging, to write. While lots of times the match ups stem from me thinking up what might make a cool fight, I always try to find a way that they make sense within the context of the story. It is one of the reasons why I opted out of doing a Hinata/Orochimaru fight. I had some ideas, but when you look at the Orochimaru's motivations in the canon, being in Hell ironically meets all of his goals. He had no reason to really fight her.

The core challenge really came down to balancing drastically different move sets and making the victories believable.

I think that is everything for this week.

See you next Saturday.

Depths

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 16

"Kiba! You and Akamaru destroy every building around us right now!"

Kiba raised an eyebrow for the briefest of instants before whistling for his companion and launching himself into the air.

"Gatsuga!"

They vanished into twin drilling streaks so powerful the air pressure alone chewed away at nearby buildings and forced structures to buckle under their pressure. Shikamaru allowed himself to grin as the dust clung to the monsters and gave them shape. It would give them a better chance to dodge.

Ino, we're going to be coming in fast. Make sure everyone is at the rendezvous or at least linked to a bunker seal. I don't want anyone left behind.

He spotted the subtle twitch on the younger ninja as the message passed into their thoughts. They needed to keep it together a little longer. Everything came down to timing. They needed enough time for everyone to get in place, but needed to move fast enough they weren't sitting targets.

He flipped over a claw, snagging the creature and flinging it into a nearby apartment.

Minato would need protection while he made the final preparations for the village-wide warp. The chances for failure were high, and with

his depleted chakra, a failed Hiraishin could end up killing everyone connected to the barely tested seal. It required an insanely long distance, a ridiculous number of people, and all from multiple relay seals rather than direct contact with him.

Yeah, desperate really described the plan well.

"How are they doing, Neji?"

"Konohamaru has fenced everyone in behind his adamantine cage. It's holding, but the chakra within the staffs is definitely weakening."

"Have you figured out how to see these things yet?"

"I can give warnings and direction."

"Take a team of ten with you and get them out of there. Head immediately to my location. The rest of you, protect Yondaime-sama at all costs."

Kiba cursed as an invisible hand swatted him out of his technique and sent him crashing into the street. He instantly rolled to his feet, simultaneously jamming his shoulder back into socket. Gently sniffing the air, hundreds of different smells filtered into his nostrils until the faint scent of the one who struck him came to the surface.

The son of a bitch was big.

"Akamaru." The dog leapt down as he summoned a single Kage Bunshin. "Jinju Kongo Henge: Santoro!"

The three individuals merged and transformed into a single giant wolf with three ferociously snarling heads. The beast sniffed again and growled as the attacker's scent became more potent.

"Cho Garoga."

In a violent spin, it shot forward in a gigantic vortex, crushing and tearing up anything caught in the expansive turbulence surrounding the core spiral. Kiba smashed into the attacker, driving it back through an entire city block worth of buildings as teeth and claw ripped at its body.

Suddenly, two large hands broke into the technique and snatched two of the heads by their necks - then ripped.

The clone dispelled instantly as Kiba and Akamaru cried out from the forced separation. The dog whimpered as their captor lifted him high into the air and whipped him into the ground.

"Akamaru!" Kiba snarled and curled up into a ball. "Gatenga!"

He spun into a buzz-saw of chakra, cutting his way free and biting deep into his assailant's chest. A fist hooked from the left, catching him in the ribs and destroying his internal organs on impact. The world went silent as the painful sound gurgled in his throat and the being tossed him next to a crumpled Akamaru.

The horrors that had been destroying his home bled into sight as his heartbeat slowed. His killer only took shape as a silhouette, taller than any man he had ever seen and twice as bulky with muscle overlaying muscle. A jaw of bone encased his normal chin and distinct orange eyebrows rested beneath a bald head.

Akamaru's breaths became fainter and slower with every cycle as the dog inched its way over to him. Resting his muzzle on top of Kiba's chest, the dog gave a soft whine.

"Yeah, I know buddy." The words came out in a light tone, despite the emotions tightening his throat. Close your eyes and rest. I'll get us out of this mess."

His companion did as instructed and gave a final gentle sigh. Kiba bit his lip until he tasted fresh blood and weakly hugged the canine's head closer to him. So many times, he'd wanted to be the hero and

done something stupid. Akamaru always dove in right beside him unquestioningly and always supported every dream he had. Even when Shino and Hinata were moved to another team directly under the Hokage, or when the latter and Lee and Naruto sacrificed themselves to save the world, he never felt lonely. Even when Hinata and Naruto got together, or how Naruto continued to do the most awesome praise worthy things, he never got jealous. He always felt fine because he had a best friend that would never leave him alone or think someone was better.

"Yeah, Akamaru, I'll get us out." He reached into his pocket as the silhouette stomped closer. Pulling out a fistful of custom exploding tags, he held them up defiantly as the man leaned down over them. "You always said I'd have a moment where I became just as much a hero as Naruto and those guys."

He poured an unnecessary amount of chakra into the tags, forcing them to ignite and start hissing.

"Here's my signal, Konoha! Get the hell out of town and leave the rest to me!" He grinned as the tags started to smoke and the giant lifted his foot over him. "Akamaru and I better get a damn statue!"

Shika…

I know, Ino. I know.

The fiery dome raised high above the skyline and expanded outward as marred earth quaked beneath his feet. Hundreds of yards out and the heat still prickled his skin and stung his eyes. Considering it came from where Kiba's technique stopped, it wasn't hard to deduce what happened. Another powerful pair, another friend, had perished.

He snapped away from the remorseful thoughts and cemented his attention on the rescue group.

They're almost twenty shy.

"Hokage-sama, all survivors accounted for." Konohamaru wiped blood out of his eyes with a scowl. "We didn't want to get pinned down so we kept moving this way, but after most of the escort squad got taken out, I had to resort to boxing us in until helped arrived. I'm sorry."

"You did what you coul-"

"They've found us." Neji's face remained stoic as the color drained from it. "We're going to be completely overrun."

"Suiton: Suiryudan no Jutsu." Streams of water burst out from the plumbing within building walls, coalescing into a giant liquid dragon that surged into the sky and snaked around them as Kakashi wheeled up beside Shikamaru. "That should distract whatever is up there for a moment. Without the Sharingan, I can't do anything more."

"It's going to have to be enough. Yondaime?"

"Is everyone accounted for?"

Ino?

Everyone but Shino.

Is he close enough to a contact point we can wait?

… *He says no.*

"Yondaime, do it now."

The seal beneath their feet crackled to life as arks of electricity coursed in front of their faces.

"Something's wrong."

"No."

The terrified whisper in Neji's voice made Shikamaru's head snap around almost like an owl's. The Hyuga genius stared directly up instead of relying on his Byakugan, his teeth clenched in frustration. Shikamaru followed the gaze - the hairs standing up on the back of his neck one by one.

The gray man held his arms over his head as dozens of dark purple orbs swirled around him. They grew with each complete orbit, the malevolent light growing brighter and casting a violet hue on the city below.

"Yondaime!"

Shino stirred awake as a thousand bees stung at his skin. He cracked an eye open. Konoha lay out in front of his spot embedded in the remains of the Hokage monument. The bunkers and central gathering point flickered and crackled as untamed chakra emanated from the seals.

The glowing points faded without the resounding flash that should accompany the teleportation technique.

It failed.

The gray creature appeared in the sky, summoning dark orbs of terrible energy.

Uncharacteristic panic welled up in Shino's aching chest as the spheres grew. The gray man flung the orbs down as hundreds of frightened shrieks echoed up out of the city. In a dull hum, they sailed to the ground, targeting the bunkers and central rallying point. Time seemed to stop for a moment as everything went still.

Towering spires rose from the streets and crept outward in slow motion, consuming the targets and everything around them.

Shino watched for a moment, terrible images flashing in his mind's eye and grief intensifying the pain in his chest. He struggled to move, to act, but the combination of misery and pain wrestled him back to unconsciousness.

Allen-kun's power draped over her like a wind kissed sheet, manifesting into the short claws and coat of its awakened form. Jashin reclined in his stone throne with a humorless smirk. A pair of chains originated from the corners of his regal chair, one leading to a silent humanoid hollow that was likely Ichigo. The other chain on the opposite side led over to a five-tailed fox, crouched back on its haunches as bloody reiryoku danced over its body like a shell.

"I may have misjudged you, girl. If you needed to mutilate your eyes to see at that mere range, perhaps it is my line as a whole that has lost its potency."

He saw us from that far out?

They had attempted to keep as much distance as her eyes allowed from the enemy camp. It didn't take long for that plan to fall apart as the ground beneath them shuddered and carried them directly to Jashin.

"You see." He pulled a pinky across his eye, dispelling the illusion to reveal the silvery pupil-less eyes of the Byakugan. "I inherited this doujutsu from my mother and passed it down through my children. Tell me, do you know the name Hamura Otsutsuki?"

"According to legend, he was the founder of the Hyuga Clan."

Jashin's face soured and he replaced the illusion over his eye.

"Yes, according to legend. I wonder if that is what becomes of most heroes."

"If you are bound to this place." The ribbon on Rukia's released Zanpakuto draped over her forearm. "I fail to see how you can consider yourself a hero."

"No, you wouldn't. Would you?" Jashin stood to his full height and began to pace back and forth in front of his prisoners. "It is only those that shine in the light who can be considered heroes. Those sacrificing themselves to wallow in the darkness for the greater good, they are forgotten or judged for standing in shadow."

"Where you end up in death can't be the basis of good or evil." Sasuke came around from the back of the throne. "A backstabber like Naruto runs free, while someone with a pure cause is trapped here."

"I don't think your actions can be dismissed because of a pure cause, Sasuke-san." Hinata held his glare, praying the visor over her eyes would shield her from any genjutsu.

"You've learned to actually speak, Hinata. Too bad it isn't anything intelligent." He glanced over at Jashin as he thumbed his sword. "I'm using my Sharingan to let Naruto see this while retaining his demonized from. I'm going to kill her in front of him so he can feel loss as I have."

"You have been rather well behaved so you've earned a treat." Jashin smiled down at Rukia. "You defeated two of my minions and have earned a place at my side."

"I decline." Rukia pointed the tip of her katana at his throat as frost formed on its edge. "We are leaving this place - all of us."

"Delightful, you think your friend can still be saved." Jashin snapped his fingers and Ichigo's chain disengaged from the throne. "Go ahead and play around with him for a while, you'll quickly understand none of you can be saved by anyone other than me."

Ichigo howled and lunged for Rukia, knocking her out farther into the wasteland.

Hinata stifled the urge to go after her. Instead, she sprinted forward as Sasuke drew his chokuto. Slamming her palm down on its pommel, she slashed for his throat with her free claws. Lightning charged in his hand as he blocked her strike before he stabbed it for her face. Hinata whirled out of the way, swinging her shin up for his head. The Chidori current surged to life around him, paralyzing her as the jolts ran through her muscles. Pulling the blade free from its sheath, he slashed for her neck.

Ribbons separated from the rest of Crown Clown and pierced the ground farther away, dragging her to safety as the sword tip passed a paper's width from her skin. She summoned her reiatsu to the surface to force the stun to fade. Gathering the energy into the clawed fingers, she swung down, releasing a barrage of thin razor-sharp blasts.

"Hakai no Tsume!"

Sasuke leapt over the projectiles as his hands flew through a half dozen seals.

"Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu!"

The fireball soared down like a comet, blowing Hinata's hair back. She zipped out of the way, only for Sasuke to appear in front of her - the flare of his Chidori reflecting within murderous Sharingan.

The lava solidified into rock under Rukia's feet as pure cold radiated off of her. She spun with a double-handed slash, catching the hollowfied Ichigo in the ribs. The cut instantly froze and patches of frost spread out over the deathly white skin. The monster rounded on her with a backslash from Zangetsu, but the damage slowed him enough she managed to dodge… barely.

"Fool, do you think we have the luxury for you to be possessed right now?" Rukia dropped the temperature of her body another twenty degrees. "Get a hold of yourself."

Ichigo responded with a shriek as waves of chaotic reiatsu made her slide backward. The frozen tissue thawed and immediately healed. She cursed as an orb of intense spiritual energy formed at the tip of his horns. It fired, tearing a canyon in the ground and disintegrating the cliffs surrounding them. Her Shunpo carried her over the cero as the residual energy actually raised the temperature of her skin by almost thirty degrees.

Such rapid fluctuation will damage me even if I'm careful with Sode no Shirayuki's ability.

She landed softly behind Ichigo and the monster slowly turned around. Sucking in a calming breath, she lifted her blade up in front of her chest.

"You radiate such fearsome strength, Ichigo. Every time I believe I've seen your full potential, more of that inner-power manifests itself. Some would say that this form in front of me is your true strength - and they would be wrong." She smiled kindly at him as the temperature began to plummet. "For you to hold this back every time you fight, for you to not lose yourself in it, is your true strength and a testament to how much power you, Ichigo Kurosaki, possess."

The creature stalked toward her, each step deliberate and menacing.

"I am going to end this now, Ichigo, and I pray you survive. Bankai!"

Her reiatsu skyrocketed and exploded into a frigid pure white mist. It rushed out in all directions, instantly freezing every molecule solid as all matter dropped to absolute zero. An ornate snow colored kimono enveloped her as every trace of skin and hair became the same shade. Ribbons bloomed off her belt and looped inward, giving the appearance of fairy wings. The blade of her Zanpakuto shifted to one

of transparent ice as the final adornments in her hair frosted into place.

"Hakka no Togame."

She remained still, like a beautiful statue, as the mist slowly settled to the ground. Frozen in mid step, Ichigo's body made a cracking noise as the glaciated tissue slowly began to give out to gravity. So, even something so beyond her spiritual power succumbed to the absolute cold of her Bankai. She had feared it would be that way. The ability of her Zanpakuto wasn't tied to reiatsu or her personal strength. It merely became a force of nature, nearly as dangerous to her as an enemy.

His rampaging power had been too much. He outclassed her so greatly that her survival up until now had been a matter of luck or a potential inner conflict on his part. Even then, the risk grew with each passing second. She had no choice. For their comrades, and for Ichigo himself, she couldn't let him remain as a monster and slave.

Still, it made her grateful that tears couldn't form right now. The lack of physical symptoms brought about by her temporary cryonic death softened the emotions that were already running rampant. No tightness of the chest, no heartache or sickness, just the indifferent flow of reishi keeping her nerves functioning.

Now, it stayed in her thoughts… at least, until the thaw came and the sadness hit her fully.

A sharp fracture ran up the dreadful hollow mask that encased Ichigo's head. A low sound tickled her ears. It slowly grew louder without losing its depth. If her heart were able to beat, it would have accelerated as the sound intensified.

It was a growl.

More lines ran up the beast's face as the rumbling became more pronounced. In short jerking movements, the head twitched around

like a rabid dog trying to force its head through a hole in a fence. The frost flaked away as the jaws gnashed and the creature strained.

"It seems I grieved too early, Ichigo."

The Hollow bellowed, it's reiatsu becoming so potent the tissue thawed and repaired itself in seconds. Rukia's relieved smile faded into a battle hardened glare. Ten seconds of mobility - that was all she had before her body gave out and she succumbed to irreparable damage. Ten seconds to subdue this monster enough Ichigo could regain control.

Using Shunpo, she moved behind Ichigo and sliced him from shoulder to hip. It sluggishly spun around, shrugging off the cold damage. Already to his side, she amputated his sword wielding arm and severed the tendons in the back of his legs. Instantly regenerating, the monster reclaimed Zangetsu and tried to cut her again - only for her to be attacking from another angle.

"You may be able to survive in this mist because of your fearsome reiatsu, but it slows your movements so I can easily stay ahead of you. You're weakening every moment. Now is the time to regain control, Ichigo!"

A sharp snap echoed across the battlefield as the bone and tissue in her ankle cracked like struck glass. She wobbled as he reached for her, but she managed to slice the hand away.

Her wrist gave out similarly to her ankle.

Ichigo roared, the force blasting her away and onto her back as the mist dispelled. More spider-web lines crept over her skin as she struggled to sit up. His hand reformed and he looked over at her. Nothing more than empty eye-sockets, the rage rolling off him didn't need to be visual for it to be felt.

I can't move.

Ichigo curled over like a predator ready to spring for a kill.

I have to exit my Bankai gradually in order to survive it, but I don't have that much time.

Ichigo vanished as the air reverberated around him. Rukia squeezed her eyes shut.

I'm sorry.

Ichigo reappeared above her and reached down for her head. Suddenly, an equally terrifying behemoth appeared, slugging Ichigo across the face and sending the hollow bouncing across the frozen ground. Rukia opened her eyes wide as her Bankai slowly melted away and the cracks in her skin began to bleed.

"I gave you one freaking job!" Kyo leapt back as Kyubi swiped at him. "Keep calm so fuzz-nuts stays contained."

"You will address me with respect, armored rodent."

"How about I turn you into a new robe? Mizuchi!"

The blades of wind churned into a twister, biting into the nine-tailed fox and forcing him to take a step back.

"That - hurt."

Kyubi snarled and pounced for the samurai. Kyo darted away, but the fox pursued him as a ball of demonic reiryoku condensed in its mouth. The Bijudama shot out as Kyo spun around and placed a palm on the flat of his katana.

"Genbu."

The menacing ball exploded against the turtle shell of compressed atmosphere. Kyo frowned as the dust and smoke cleared. The Kyubi sat back on his haunches and gave an exaggerated yawn.

"This is boring." Kyubi stretched then slowly padded away. "I'm going to see if the runt has stopped being catatonic. Eating him while we're enslaved merely exchanges one prison for another."

"Damn flea bag." Kyo propped his blade over his shoulder and headed the same direction, keeping a wide enough berth so the fox couldn't get the drop on him, but staying close enough to stop it from inciting Naruto further. "Hey punk, you get your act together yet?"

Naruto slammed a Rasengan against the chain wrapped around his neck.

"This thing won't break." He tossed the excess link to the ground. "I'm not going to be able free myself from here."

"That's a problem then." Kyo glanced over at the fox. "You could help by reigning yourself in so he wasn't running around like a feral dog."

"I would like to think the form is a bit more refined than those slobbering pets, thank you." Kyubi settled into a relaxed crouch so he could face the other two. "And besides, I have no control over him right now. Until I take his body for my own, which requires a full nine tails, he is merely being possessed by the negative nature of our demonic energy."

"The fox is right. My body is running on instinct right now." Naruto gripped his forehead in concentration. "While I've never brought it back from anything more than four tails, normally, I can retain enough mental function to calm down and regain control."

"So quit your temper tantrum and get to work."

"I'm trying, Kyo. There's something else going on that's keeping the demonic chakr- energy from subsiding."

"It's that infernal Sharingan." The Kyubi growled out as his tails swished agitatedly. "Like Madara, your dear old friend can manipulate our energy at will. He's not letting it diminish."

"He's letting me see everything going on, so I knew he was messing with me, but I didn't think he could control this many tails." Naruto ran his hand through his hair. "He's not as powerful as Madara so he shouldn't-"

Naruto fell silent as a tremor ran through him.

"Great, he's gone quiet again. To think, I used to actually savor moments like this."

"He's going to try to kill, Hinata."

"You're not going to start panicking and pass out again are you?" Kyo summoned a sheath and put away his sword. "I was hoping you'd gotten over your bitch phase."

"Ha."

"Both of you shut up. Of course it pisses me off. Sasuke brings up a lot of bad feelings, and the fact he still hasn't realized he's wrong and wants to hurt Hinata to get to me burns." Naruto clenched and unclenched his fists as he sucked in a centering breath. "The bastard doesn't realize how strong she is though. I've let my fears make me forget that she won in Madara's tower and handled the Earl for a long time by herself. She is a dangerous powerful ninja, and that idiot going after her is basically the same as intentionally putting me back in control."

Hinata caught the Chidori in her armored hand, the lacquer sizzling under the kinetic plasma. She could feel the skin underneath burning, but not enough to recoil. It didn't hurt anywhere near what she had experienced with all the training and battles up until now. Rearing back, she kicked him in the gut, sending him flying back. He spun in the air so his feet landed on the side of the cliff.

"You're lucky those armaments of yours are so strong."

"They certainly make this fight easier."

Sasuke's classic grin tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"You say that like you're not struggling to keep up. That mask may block my genjutsu, but don't assume you have a chance because of that."

I had hoped the mask would shield me. Thank you, Allen-san.

"You are an opponent I cannot take lightly, Sasuke-san. However, do not mistake my caution for not keeping up."

She pushed reiryoku to her feet and leapt onto the cliff side, racing up directly for him. Energy streamed from the center of her palms as lighting charged his chokuto and an electric spear shot out from the point. She jumped with a twist over it, using her whip-like attack to knock it aside. Landing, she unleashed a furious offense with the thin streams.

Sasuke scowled as his Sharingan constantly flicked back and forth, narrowly allowing him to dodge the unpredictable path of her attack. The Chidori formed in his free hand as he backpedaled. Swinging it in a wide arc, thousands of lightning senbon flew in her direction, forcing her to tighten the weave of her strands and block them. Forming a horse seal, he sucked in an incredible lungful of air.

"Katon: Goka Mekkayaku!"

An incinerating wall of flames rushed out of his mouth, blanketing her defense and melting the cliff face. Forming the strands into a protective cocoon, she dove directly into the wall with a forceful spin. Sasuke charged his chokuto again as Hinata emerged from the inferno. Her reiryoku blade formed and the two weapons collided in a crackling clash. She dropped and spun with the blade. He leapt over it, but she continued the rotation with a vertical arc for his head.

He blocked with his chokuto as another energy blade formed in her other hand and she slashed across his exposed midsection, carving a shallow line over his abs. He leapt away from the cliff on to flat ground with Hinata in close pursuit. The tip of her attack came an inch from the back of his neck when a blur entered her field of vision. She barely twisted around into a guard before the five-tailed Naruto tackled her through the air and into the earth, pinning her with a snarl.

"Naruto." She gasped out as the putrid reiryoku stung her skin and ate away at the protective sleeves covering her arms.

The creature bellowed as an orb of black energy formed in front of his mouth. She summoned a wave of cursed energy, but the possessed Jinchuriki responded by sprouting another tail as a skeletal structure began to form over his back. The chain around his neck jerked sharply, cancelling the attack and reducing the tails back to five.

Jashin rolled his eyes as he clutched the chain and Sasuke fumed.

"I didn't need you to step in. I can kill her on my own."

"And getting skewered in the back of the neck was part of some masterful plan?" Jashin lessened his grip and the fox's face inched closer. "Keeping the other one bound is taking a great deal of focus. I would prefer you keep your attention on limiting the Kyubi's tails until my power has fully domesticated him."

"Hn."

"Okay my little beast, kill her."

No choice! I hope I keep it small enough I can still fight afterward.

The sphere of her vision condensed tightly into a form hugging layer as her reiatsu skyrocketed.

"Dynamic entry!"

Lee's flying double stomp produced an audible crack from the demonic fox's ribs and sent it tumbling over the edge of a nearby valley.

"You know that attack exhausts you, Hinata-san." Lee offered a hand to help her up.

"I was trying to keep it small enough it wouldn't drain me completely, but yes, it was a risk."

"There is no need for such risk any longer. We shall watch each other's backs." Lee hoisted her up and faced Sasuke with a glare. "I would like to deal with the traitor myself, but the choice is yours."

"I can counter Sasuke's attacks more easily. Jashin is faster, probably at least as fast as you are at the fourth gate."

"An excellent strategy, Hinata-san." Lee brought his guard up. "I shall engage our host. What do we do about Naruto-kun?"

I would prefer you keep your attention on limiting the Kyubi's power.

The fact another tail grew when she cut Sasuke and completely distracted him, did fall in line with Jashin's words. The Kyubi responded to anger, but Naruto had always calmed himself down in the past. If Sasuke could inhibit the demonic energy, did that mean he could advance it?

"It might be a gamble, but I think if I defeat Sasuke, Naruto-kun will come back to his senses."

"Then, I leave it to you, Hinata-san."

"Right."

"I want to deal with you one at a time." Jashin brought his hand up. "My exuberant friend, why don't you spend some time in my genjutsu

while we deal with this girl?"

Hinata's throat went dry as Lee froze and his eyes glassed over.

"He's supposedly unaffected by genjutsu. Mine didn't work on him."

"It appears to have taken hold, Sasuke."

This isn't good.

If she remembered correctly, Lee's immunity to it during their past life stemmed from his inability to mold chakra, since an illusion or suggestion depended on manipulating the chakra flow within a person's brain. While non-ninja could still succumb to genjutsu, the chaotic imbalance between Lee's physical and spiritual energies made it impossible for a deceiver to adequately take control.

Now that they only held purely spiritual energy, Lee's immunity no longer existed. Like with chakra, she could probably shake him out of it with a burst of reiryoku into his system, but he could immediately fall prey to it again.

Lee shouted so loud his entire body shook. He exploded forward, closing the gap between him and Jashin in a single step. The ancient man blinked in confusion an instantly before Lee buried a punch in his gut and sent him sliding backward.

The taijutsu master relaxed back into his regular fighting stance with a frown.

"Now that I have experienced it for myself, I find genjutsu very distasteful."

Jashin cradled his stomach and leaned against a boulder for support.

"How did you escape so easily? With my Yin affinity, even mother became ensnared in my illusions for a short time."

"Anything can be overcome with a strong enough will and an honest heart cannot be deceived. You will not dampen my youthful determination!"

Hinata's mouth dropped slightly. To escape genjutsu, one needed to recognize it and then use a strong pulse of chakra to essentially reset the brain. Had Lee done that to a degree, but at a level high enough it broke the superior technique without a detectable change in his reiatsu? It was possible his companion spirit may have assisted him like Allen-kun did her.

Could it have actually been through sheer will?

Kurenai-sensei once claimed there were those who trained to resist mind tampering and illusions could be overcome through distractions such as intense pain. In both cases, the individuals whose training found success or who could disable a fully established genjutsu were few and often written off as myths. However, it did leave the possibility for Lee to really have done it as he said.

If I do see Kurenai-sensei again, I'll have to ask.

A feral growl echoed up out of the valley and the demonic Naruto clawed over the edge, making a destructive charge straight for Lee.

"Lee!"

"Go Hinata-san, freeing Naruto-kun is our highest priority."

Lee's Zanpakuto burst to life and he ran to meet Naruto head on.

Hinata faced Sasuke as his face darkened in anger. Yes, they had spent enough time playing this game.

Nel frantically scrambled over to Rukia as the Shinigami watched in awe and a fully armored Sado wrestled Ichigo into the ground. Samehada scurried up from behind, peeking over Nel's shoulder as

the child pinched her uvula and vomited clear saliva over Rukia's chest.

"Wha- what are you doing? That's disgusting!"

Rukia tried to recoil, but the sound of something cracking came from her shoulder.

"Don't move, Rukia-chan! You're hurt bad." Nel drooled another deluge of liquid. "Don't worry, my spit will heal you."

"I may be better off dying." Rukia cringed as a few droplets splashed on her thawed cheeks. "If Ni-sama saw me now…"

Nel searched around, trying to hit the worst parts. Her spit wasn't going to heal a lot of the damage, but it should keep her alive until Karin arrived… if Karin arrived. This place was so scary dangerous, who knew what could happen? They already saw big monsters and old enemies. Gasp! What if there were zombies?

Double gasp! What if there were perverts?

"Nel, is that Sado?"

"Yep!" Nel hopped to her feet and began acting out the previous battle. "Chad fought the fish guy, and they punched each other a lot, then, I got this sword called Samehada, but I call him GiGi. The fish guy made this huge water shark and smashed Chad, but then Chad came back with that awesome new look and beat the fish dude with a single punch."

She threw a fake punch at the sword, which gurgled and collapsed to the ground like she killed it.

Ichigo tossed Sado high into the air and immediately leapt up in a blur. Sword and armored fist slashed, creating a shockwave that sent Nel flying. Samehada caught her in its teeth as its blades dug into

the ground like centipede legs. Rukia winced, but managed to remain in her spot.

"We need to get you out of here." Nel pat the sword's side and it set her down. She quickly scooped up the Shinigami's shoulder and carefully dragged her to the other side of a small rocky outcropping "You should be safe no-"

Sado crashed into the cliff right behind her like a wrecking ball.

She timidly turned around as dust rolled out of the newly formed cave. The familiar light magenta and black hand gripped the corner of the opening and the behemoth pulled himself out. The intricate patterns that once covered his arms had spread over his entire torso, and from the small tears in his jeans, the skin on his legs had also become armored. The colors had melded with those of his left arm, balancing the three distinct pigments.

The armor had also spread over his head, forming a helmet with six ridges that extended over the back like hair. Glowing emerald eyes cut up to the hollowfied Ichigo as a burst of steam blew out of the thin slats over his mouth.

"Sado." Rukia cringed as she failed to sit up. "Are you okay?"

The giant gave a thumbs up as a green light formed around his feet. It launched him up like a springboard as his left fist charged. He blocked a sword swing with his shield and punched down. Ichigo shrieked as his body folded under the blow, the stony earth buckling into a deep crater.

"What is that thing?" Nel scratched at her mask. "It feels sort of familiar."

"That's Ichigo when his hollow has fully manifested."

"Oh." Nel blinked for a moment than waved her arms frantically in the air. "Wait, that's Ichigo?"

"Yes." Rukia reached out with her good hand. "Nel, help me up so I can see."

"You're hurt really bad."

"I'll be fine." Nel helped Rukia up enough that the latter could see the battle unfold. "I thought as much. Ichigo's tiring."

"He is?"

"His movements have slowed from when we started. The damage from my Bankai, and now Sado's strength, are gradually wearing him down. If we can weaken the hollow enough, the fool should be able to regain control of his body."

The aura of a cero bathed the battlefield in a red glow as it formed in a swirling orb. It exploded into a potent beam, slamming into Sado's shield and forcing the giant higher into the air. Ichigo appeared above him, preparing another cero as the first blast carried him directly into it.

"Sado." Rukia shouted out. "Above you!"

"La Muerte!"

Keeping the shield in place, he whirled around and punched with his other arm directly into the new attack. The conflicting energies destabilized and everything exploded into a crimson colored halo. Nel cried out as rocks and wind were flung away by the backlash.

Cloaked in residual energy, Sado and Ichigo grappled as they fell and crashed. Sado sprung to his feet as his shield arm morphed back to its offensive form. The extension at the shoulder opened as reiryoku flared to life. His left arm glowed blue until the entire appendage burst into a swirling mass of spiritual energy.

"Can you hear me in there, Ichigo? Everything is devoted into this one punch, all of my power and all of my thoughts. I hope this

reaches you and brings you back."

The hollow charged, but Sado punched forward.

"El Terminar!"

Drilling tightly like the shot from a rail-gun, the blast burrowed into Ichigo's torso, carrying the monster back even as its feet scraped at the ground and blood ruptured out of its back. Farther and farther, the wave pushed as the hollow's arms failed to divert the attack.

"Ichigo." Nel sniffed.

Two deathly white hands met on Zangetsu's hilt, black and red reiryoku surging from tsuba to tip. Everyone could only watch in horror as the creature roared furiously and swung down. A Getsuga Tensho, bigger and more terrifying than anything Nel had ever witnessed, consumed Sado's attack in an instant and rushed the giant.

"Chad!"

The behemoth formed his shield. The edges snapped out as reiryoku poured out and expanded its surface area. Ichigo's wave completely trampled over it, almost eradicating Rukia and Nel as it tore a new valley across the battlefield. Continuing past them into the deeper reaches of Hell, Nel looked back in disbelief.

"Chad." Her voice came out as a whisper.

The gentle giant kneeled on the lone platform within the valley. Smoldering with each ragged breath, the shield crumbled away as the armor faded back into his skin. Ichigo came up in front of him. Patches of gnarled muscle and puncturing bone struggled to self-repair as the menacing figure growled.

"Rukia. Rukia, we have to save Chad." Nel turned toward the Shinigami. "Rukia?"

The petite girl lay unconscious as a small trickle of blood flowed from the corner of her mouth.

Oh no, what do I do? What do I do?

Samehada curled up around her and bit down on her mask. A rush of reiryoku flowed into her as the sentient blade opened and completely enveloped her.

Ichigo swung down, but another blade blocked it, followed by a fearsome stomp to his caved in chest, and finished with a diagonal cut down his torso. The monster stumbled back as Nel landed in front of him. Her Shihakusho only reached mid-thigh while the rest of it remained hidden by Samehada's gleaming scales as they hugged to her curves in a protective garment. Her long green hair flowed out behind her as her now womanly face studied the slowly recovering monster calmly.

"This is an impressive gift, Samehada." She looked at her old katana and at the scales covering her arms. She gave one a light kiss. "Thank you."

The armor shifted slightly with a soft squeal.

This reclamation of my adult form will end as soon as Samehada's stored energy runs out. I don't have long.

Her eyes scrutinized every inch of the hollow. It lacked the intelligence, or at least concern, to protect its body from harm - except its mask. Not so much as a smudge blemished the pristine bone of the head and horns. Whatever abomination it was, the core of it definitely originated from hollow, which meant damaging the mask would diminish its power.

It meant Ichigo would wake up.

Of course, recognizing it and accomplishing it were entirely different matters. The fact she and Chad had felt such cold emanating from

this place they couldn't approach meant Rukia hadn't even attempted to depower Ichigo. Doing so would have killed him, so she probably had attempted to weaken him enough she didn't need to use her full power. Defeat and then release had been her only option. Sado tried the same, but also never had a chance to reach the head.

She was so outclassed she didn't have a choice. The only benefit is if she did break the mask, none of her power would hurt him.

"Samehada, we're putting this into one shot." She held her zanpakuto up in front of her. "Utae, Gamuza."

Her reiatsu swelled up around her in a blinding pink aura. It quickly parted like petals, revealing her Resurreccion. Four horse like legs covered in shaggy fur held her armored torso upright like a centaur. The mask had expanded, the horns becoming more wicked.

I need to take out his sword arm and then shatter his mask.

She summoned a heavy double-sided lance to her hand.

"Lanzador Verde."

The projectile sailed through the air like a cannonball, picking up speed and power with every inch. The hollowfied Substitute wobbled, failing to get out of the way as the lance hit. It ripped the entire upper right portion of Ichigo's body away, leaving only an unbalanced head and half a hollow hole. Zangetsu pierced the ground as Nel charged.

Wait until the regeneration heals the mortal injuries and then strike.

She sealed her zanpakuto, reverting back to the Arrancar woman. Vanishing into a Sonido, she stopped directly in front of him as liquid bone spurt out of the wound and reconstructed flesh.

A little more.

The arm started to grow back as she readied her katana.

Now!

Lee winced as the very tips of Naruto's claws raked over his shoulder. The potent cloak had little difficulty bypassing his flames, forcing him to block with his physical defenses. Not an impossible challenge, but one that took a considerable greater amount of endurance, since every brush with the caustic energy snapped at his nerves.

The fox lunged forward to bite, but Lee brought a swift kick up, knocking him into the air. Naruto flipped rapidly, landing on all fours then stretching the reiryoku arms out. Lee vanished in a burst of speed and stomped down on Naruto's skull and buried the head in the earth.

Hopping off, Lee quickly took another sip of his flask. Keeping the fourth gate active constantly tired him each second it remained open. However, it merely meant he needed to double his training to have the stamina necessary to handle it. Unlike Gai-sensei, he possessed a blessed gift to use the gates without harm, becoming exhausted merely stemmed from him being lazy.

With the head remaining in the ground, the five tails stabbed at Lee in a staggering rhythm. He dodged between the spears and caught Naruto by the shoulders as he emerged. Pulling him into a bear-hug, Lee launched them high into the air with a dizzying spin.

"Omote Renge!"

Lee disengaged from the attack, driving Naruto headfirst into the ground. The beast recovered instantly and charged a demonic orb in front of his mouth before swallowing it.

Hinata-san is fighting in that direction!

Opening the fifth and sixth gates, Lee appeared in front of Naruto and slammed his palms up as the mouth opened.

"Yakedo Fenikkusu."

The flames exploded from his hands and fanned outward like wings as his fingers curled inward like burning talons. The demonic blast struggled against Lee's attack, the two clashing energies tearing at the plateau and toppling cliffs as the air itself trembled.

Lee gave a shout with his final push, creating a violent reaction that caused both attacks to rupture into a searing wave of white.

Blood dripped onto the blandly colored city rooftop as white clouds drifted lazily within a blue sky. Ichigo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, only to cough up another lungful of crimson. Every muscle, from his arms down to his toes ached and cramped from fatigue.

This time was different.

His twin rested a reverse-colored Zangetsu on his shoulder. The usually mocking grin carried a hidden seriousness this time. The yellow irises and black sclera had a stricter glare than their normal dangerous glint. The pure white skin and hair were only stained by splotches of red, and unfortunately, all of it Ichigo's.

Yeah, this time was different.

His inner-hollow, the being who normally chose to toy with and harass him, always showed up at the worst times. That Jashin creep was out there fighting his friends and he was in his mindscape screwing around with the dark side of his spirit.

Okay, he couldn't really consider it screwing around with how badly he felt.

"Can you do anything other than lose, Ichigo?" The Hollow closed the distance in an instant and swung down, bringing Ichigo to his knees while holding an unsteady block. "I show you how to use Getsuga Tensho in Bankai and you lose to some weakling Arrancar." He struck again and the roof beneath Ichigo cracked. "I give you some of my power to form that cute little mask of yours and you lose." He slashed down again. "You lose and you lose and you lose and you lose."

Every strike was punctuated with another bone jarring blow.

"All you do is lose, Ichigo!"

Ichigo felt the hollow's foot touch his spine with a forceful kick and he went bouncing and skidding across the rooftop. A noiseless cry escaped the teen's mouth as he curled up on his side.

"I thought maybe with that whiny little blonde actually making you earn your power for once things would be different, but nope, you still ended up in the dirt like a bitch."

I need to get up. I need to find a way to subdue him again.

"For crying out loud, pick yourself up and have a little dignity."

"Sorry, I just needed to catch my second wind." Ichigo gave a bloody grin and forced himself up onto unsteady feet. "I figured you like talking so much I might well get a rest in."

"That's right, Ichigo, keep talking tough. You keep thinking this is another lesson and that I'm not trying to completely consume your soul."

"Isn't that what this is?' The grin faded away into seriousness. "It's obvious you're more powerful than me. You could have taken over the moment I woke up here."

"Who is to say he hasn't?" The hollow frowned as a specter formed out of his shadow and took the shape of a middle-aged man wearing a cloak and sunglasses. "Ichigo, as evidenced by the fact he holds your Bankai and you remain in Shikai, he already has consumed you. This is your existence from now on."

"Ossan… what are you talking about?"

"You're going to ruin all the fun." The hollow stabbed his white Zangetsu into the rooftop. "I've already killed two and am well on my way to a third."

A cold lump formed in Ichigo's throat as the hollow's familiar psychotic grin stretched across his sharp face. The clone leered directly into him.

"Wanna guess who it was?"

"You bastar-"

Ichigo stumbled and collapsed.

"Ichigo, it is time to rest." The old man knelt beside him as strands of his unruly black hair caught in his stubble. "You have fought long enough. You have experienced pain long enough. Cease struggling and you will find this inner-world to be a paradise of your own creation. After we leave Hell, I will use my power to return you to your human body for good."

"I'm not going to abandon my friends!"

"At the rate I'm going you won't have any." The hollow waved his hand. "Seriously, they keep lining up one after another. Kinda like that game in the human world you play in those arcades - whack-a-mole or something."

"You-" Ichigo went to get up, but the old man held him in place. "Let me go, Zangetsu."

"So you can be knocked down again, each time hurt worse than the last? Do you still not understand what the ultimate purpose of a Zanpakuto spirit is, Ichigo? We test you. We challenge you. We demand that you earn our trust and cooperation. However, the reason for all of that, our ultimate goal, is to protect you. All Zanpakuto are an extension of a Shinigami as is its spirit. All any spirit truly desires is to see their master safe and free of suffering."

"Speak for yourself."

Ichigo knocked Zangetsu's arm away and used the body-length knife to prop himself up. Protect him? This was to protect him? To hide him away as his body went berserk and his friends were harmed? Did his companion spirit really think he'd be okay with that?

"Zangetsu, this is me suffering." Ichigo leveled a glare at the unflinching specter. "Letting the people counting on me down, not keeping my promises, that causes more pain than being sliced and stabbed. You've been with me long enough now-"

"I have been with you since the moment you came into existence." The old man stood, casting his shadow over the battered Substitute. "Like a parent who watches over their child, I cried alongside you. I smiled with you. I stood by helplessly as guilt and sorrow drowned this place in murk while you stared down at your mother."

"Then you should understand why I never want to let anything happen like that again."

Zangetsu sighed and stared up at the sky.

"Understanding and agreeing are two separate concepts. Up until now, I have hoped by limiting your potential you would become discouraged and turn away from the life of a Shinigami. Time and again, when faced with defeat or failure, I prayed you would turn away from battle and return to a normal life. Instead, you pressed ahead, forcing me to relinquish more control with each greater threat.'

Ichigo's face scrunched up in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"You have no knowledge as to the depths of your power. You have no understanding of how vast it is or how it would impact you should I grant you it."

"For starters, you can kiss that human body of yours goodbye." The hollow symbolized an explosion with his hands. "That's your flesh suit going poof, along with anyone else within the range of your reiatsu. There would be a lot of poofs."

"So you're saying I would be so powerful, I could never return to the human world?"

"That's just for starters!"

"Obtaining your true potential would likely mean an existence of loneliness. Your home, your sisters, and even these very friends you seek to protect - you could lose all of them." Zangetsu steadied Ichigo with one hand and forcefully removed the blade. "That is the fate that awaits you if you continue fighting."

Zangetsu's head dipped down solemnly and even the hollow seemed more subdued.

Ichigo's mind swam with all the information and the many questions it brought up. How was he so powerful? How was Zangetsu holding back his power? Where did his inner-hollow fit into all of this? Would it be enough to stop Aizen?

What happened if it really did become worst case scenario?

No, I can't focus on worst case. I have promises to keep.

"We don't know what's really going to happen." Ichigo spoke softly as a soft smile came to his face. "Urahara-san's a genius. He might figure out a way to help me control that kind of reiatsu. It may even

be less destructive than you think. And honestly, with you here Ossan, I wouldn't be alone even if I couldn't be around everyone else."

"Ichigo-"

"It makes me happy to know I have someone who's looked out for me all this time. You've always protected me even when I stupidly kept getting in over my head. I can't thank you enough for that. But, you can't worry so much about the future that it ruins the present. If you want to keep holding back my power so I can continue to be around everyone, okay. I won't ask for it, and I'll trust you to let me have it if I need it."

Ichigo took the sword back and rested a hand on his companion spirit's shoulder.

"I'm going to keep fighting, Zangetsu."

He limped toward his inner-hollow. For everyone to be safe, that was his greatest desire. He'd take on whatever weight, whatever hardship that came along with it. He wouldn't run away because it might be easier for him. He wouldn't ask Naruto to pick up the slack or for others to do what he wasn't willing to.

Ichigo stopped a few feet shy of his clone.

I'm not going to keep letting him interfere.

"What are you going to do this time, Ichigo?" The hollow spun the blade around his wrist and rested its razor edge against the teen's throat. "You get all determined again? Going to prove how your will can leash me or that you have some big sudden power? Maybe all those losses did some brain damage, but you know I'm way stronger than you, and this time, I ain't letting you win."

"You're going to let me out."

"Weren't you listening?"

I didn't get why he kept beating me instead of finishing it, but I think I understand now. Last time we met, he claimed he and Zangetsu shared the same body. No, he claimed they were both Zangetsu. If the old man wanted to protect me, then in his crazy way, trapping me here and forcing me to give up was a way to protect me.

"You once said the difference between the king and his horse is instinct. If you are being honest about attacking my friends, all that proves is you're definitely the horse."

The normal vicious grin stretched out across the colorless face.

"And how do you figure that?"

"You have far more power than me, but when you're released, all you can do is lash out. Slaughter isn't battle, which is the one thing you crave more than anything else. I give you direction." Ichigo placed his hand on his double's shoulder. "I get you are sick of me losing, which is why you used the opportunity Hell provides to take over."

The inner-hollow eyed the hand warily.

"You're going to get yourself killed and take me along with you."

"I never had a chance to fight Jashin for real because I was struggling to keep you in check." Ichigo clutched the blade at his neck and pulled it away. "Let me prove to you my training under Naruto worked."

The hollow scowled, yanking the blade free with a sick cutting sound. He swung the blade behind him, unleashing a wave that leveled the next five skyscrapers.

"Your body is in full rampage mode right now. Figure out how to reclaim control, and I won't interfere as long as you win"

Ichigo gave a nod and gripped his Shikai with both hands, unleashing his full reiatsu.

Nel kept her katana out in front of her as she skid back in a crouch. While the bulk of it still remained on her, multiple shattered scales from Samehada glinted off the canyon floor as the beast stalked toward them. The armor prevented any fatal injuries, and her new friend didn't seem bothered by the bits and pieces taken from him. So in that case, things were going quite well.

The fact Ichigo dodged what should have been a sure hit and the next instant regenerated his arm steered the situation into a more negative area.

They had seconds before the fusion wore off and she reverted to her child form. Considering she'd spent the past few minutes being batted around and unable to counterattack, her chances of success and survival as a kid weren't high. Of course, with her body so wrecked, she'd probably just pass out.

Ichigo stopped in front of her. Hoarse breaths escaped from between the predatory teeth. Slowly, the monster reached out until an obsidian nail touched her forehead and he stopped, becoming completely motionless.

My last chance.

A shining arrow streaked by, destroying the two horns as her transformation ended and she popped apart into young girl and sword. The mask fell away in patches as the hollow properties withdrew and filled in the hole in Ichigo's chest.

Uryu landed next to Nel with an unusual heaviness.

"Seriously, Ichigo, do you have to make everything so difficult?"

Author's Notes:

I wasn't sure exactly how I would deal with Lee's genjutsu immunity if it ever came up, since as explained, the original factors no longer applied. However, after reading more abort Deidara's eye and other ways to break illusions, the concept of will became more plausible - given Lee's overabundance of it.

Not really anything more to discuss since there were not many questions or points brought up with last weeks chapter(s). I am hoping views will start picking back up once the consistency between updates becomes fully established.

Have a good week.

Ascend

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 17

Hinata ducked under a horizontal slice and quickly jabbed with her claws. Sasuke tilted his head out of the way and she leapt back. They paused for a moment, sizing each other up and taking a chance to breathe. A lone rock tumbled down the pile of rubble they'd created by destroying a nearby cliff. The stone hit the bottom with a resounding clack and they dove for each other.

In a nearly invisible exchange, hundreds of slashes and strikes flowed around each other as the two opponents expertly dodged and countered every movement. Hinata's other-worldly flexibility and reflexes allowed her to match the precision granted by Sasuke's Sharingan and speed.

He knows his Chidori current won't work on my zanpakuto and reads my attacks well enough he can fend me off with the sword. If I can halt its movement, that would take away his last defense and force him to rely purely on taijutsu and ninjutsu.

"Juho Soshiken."

The twin lion heads formed over her hands, condensing and darkening as the reiryoku changed into the hyper-dense energy supplemented by her cursed power. The left one caught the chokuto's blade in its fangs, holding it firmly in place. Lighting crackled over the blade, but the lion remained unfazed and bit down, snapping the blade as Hinata buried the other in Sasuke's chest.

Hinata frowned as lighting formed over Sasuke's hand. He'd jumped back just enough her lion only generated superficial damage. Whether he admitted it or not, after his defeat by both Naruto-kun and Lee-san, he'd gotten far more cautious. Had he made the same overconfident mistakes as with them, she would have ended the fight some time ago.

"I'd wanted to save this for those other losers, but you've taken up enough of my time. Be honored I chose to resort to this."

Her eyes widened as he swung down, and in an instant, blinding white pain ripped through her entire form as a beast crafted from the lighting above mauled her. Her muscles spasmed and she fell to the ground in a smoking heap.

She groaned inwardly as her healing ability tickled each fried nerve back to health. Such an incredibly fast attack packing that kind of power would make getting in the final blow difficult. She expanded her field of vision to take in the clouds. As dangerous as it was, she'd likely need to take another hit to see if she could predict it.

"The one benefit to this pit is the constant lighting. When I used this jutsu in the past, it required significant time to build up a powerful enough storm and it could only be used once." Sasuke raised his electrified hand again. "The heat from the lava combined with the malevolent nature of this place eliminates those weaknesses. I can unleash the Kirin immediately as many times as I want."

The ash clouds flashed and another mythic beast struck down, flattening all the cliffs in the vicinity. Hinata breathed a silent sigh of relief as the extra reiryoku she pushed around her system lessened the damage and quickened her healing. It didn't eliminate the danger, as the electricity could still shut down her heart, but it kept her able to move.

Sasuke's attack did indeed happen instantly and never taxed his energy reserves. However, it took almost two seconds to shape and

release from the clouds. It was an extremely small window to strike, although she could make it if he didn't back away.

"As strong as you have become, it is still nothing in comparison to this overwhelming power." Sasuke prepared for the Kirin again. "Now, be bound to this place and regret being someone Naruto cares for."

Hinata sprung directly from the crater to Sasuke as her trademark lion formed over her striking hand. Sasuke went to move back, only to stumble as Crown Clown's belt tethered him from underground. A Chidori roared to life in his free hand and the two strikes clashed in a violent maelstrom of wind and stray energy.

"Never." Hinata's eyes reflected from behind the visor. "I will never regret having Naruto-kun in my life. I would not be who I am today without his kindness, his loyalty, or his strength."

Sasuke scowled and dug his feet in, pushing back harder.

"He'll abandon you when it becomes convenient."

"Do not blame Naruto for protecting us when your selfish actions endangered everyone around you." His knees started to bend as she gradually overpowered him. "You turned your back on him, Sasuke."

"Kirin!"

The cape of her zanpakuto glowed brilliant silver and swept up overhead, blocking the bulk of Kirin's destructive force. She grit her teeth as the residual effects hit and the coat burned away to tatters.

"Shishi Kujiku!"

Her reiatsu exploded, the visible aura feeding into the lion-head as her secondary energy took over. The construct grew and the jaws snapped open, consuming Sasuke's attack and torso before crunching down. Gravity claimed his legs and free arm as the force

of the attack caused the rest of him to implode and the ripping energy within the mouth disintegrated the remains.

Sweat trickled down her cheeks as Allen's manifestation reverted back to pendant form. They both needed a few moments to rest - everyone needed a few moments rest. Almost instinctually, it seemed everyone still able to fight knew they'd gotten a momentary reprieve. Jashin remained content to recline in his makeshift throne and wait for them.

He didn't look happy and the turbulent reiatsu lying just beneath the surface made it clear there would be no playing around. He was going to kill them and bind them to servitude.

Lee landed behind her silently. Even the subtle differences in how he stood, and the infinitesimally small sluggishness in his arm movements as he walked up beside her betrayed how fatigued the fighting had left him. His clothing clung tightly from sweat and grime, and soot dirtied his face. He was fortunate to be in such a state.

She'd felt the clash between him and Naruto-kun.

"How many gates?"

"Six." Lee gave a subdued nice guy pose as she frowned. "I shall be fine, Hinata-san. Can you locate, Naruto-kun? I lost track of him after our final blows."

"He's unconscious and out of the way. The Kyubi's energy has faded and he's back to normal."

"That is excellent news. How are the others fairing?"

"Uryu is protecting that group and is in no shape to deal with Jashin. Ichigo and Naruto-kun may be able to help, but I don't how long it will take for them to recover from those horrible transformations. Nel's exhausted after somehow changing into her adult form. Karin-san is

doing her best to heal Rukia and Sado, but they are badly hurt… they may not make it."

"They will. Training with them has shown me how strong they are." His face became more serious. "That means we will need to defeat Jashin ourselves, otherwise, we will remained trapped here."

"Yes. We need to be careful. If we die, Hell will bind us to itself."

"That would be very unpleasant." Lee sucked in a deep breath. "I have no doubt our combined strength will grant us victory."

"Considering he uses genjutsu, it may be beneficial it is only you and me."

"Yes. Are you ready?"

She nodded and gripped the pendant form of Crown Clown. It quickly awakened and they took off. Despite the brave face, Lee would tire far too quickly in this fight. While he claimed opening all of the gates wouldn't kill him, it would leave him helpless and him being pushed into using that was likely. She needed to buy as much time as possible for his reserves to refill. Jashin hinted at his eagerness to explain his past so she could use that. The longer he talked, the better their odds increased.

They simultaneously approached Jashin as the man plastered another humorless smile over his face and stood. He slowly clapped and descended the small knoll to the open plateau. His wicked sword still rested against the throne's side, but she knew he could use his chains to retrieve it instantly.

"You know, I need to reconsider you, girl. We are family after all. You did butcher yourself, but I never considered my blood maybe became so diluted you had no choice. Regardless, be it weakening or dismissal, I forgive you. To defeat Sasuke so soundly, and without significant injury, you have earned a place at my side, great

granddaughter… well, there are a few thousand greats in there, but you understand don't you?"

"Who are you really?" Hinata kept her posture non-threatening while remaining ready to move in an instant. "Are you a Hyuga or an evil god or a hero?"

"I am all those things and more." He dragged a hand down his face. Dispelling the mask of reishi, two short horns curved upward out of his forehead as the telltale veins of the Byakugan pulsed on the sides of his unchanged face. "For starters, my name is Hamura Otsutsuki, the brother of Hogoromo, who you would know as the Rikudo Sennin."

The two ninja blinked in surprise and shared a look.

"I bet you were never told he even had a brother." Jashin's face tightened as his gaze dipped. "They remember him as the creator of ninjutsu and the savior of the world, but no one asks what he saved the world from and with whom he did it. I died shortly after defeating the ten-tails, intentionally travelling to Hell so that she could be redeemed, or in the least, prevent her escape.

She never arrived, leaving me alone in this wasteland of boiling rock and petrified life. My abilities allowed me to assert my dominion, yet, I lacked the necessary power to leave this place. I accepted it; however, realizing my sacrifice gave my children and the rest of humankind a chance to flourish. All I hoped for is my brother would come for me, all I asked for would be that the world remember me."

"We failed to do so." Lee's features softened slightly while maintaining the stern glare. "And your brother never came."

"No, although from my understanding, he never gained the opportunity, whisked away to another battle upon death." Jashin's false smile returned. "I attempted to use my limited means to connect to our original world. Those who I reached quickly came to

revere me as a god, and through a series of rather comedic misunderstandings, a cult sprung up around my voice."

"The adherents to your cult were bloodthirsty killers obsessed with death and suffering."

"I did say comical misunderstandings, did I not?" Jashin gave a light chuckle and scratched at his chin. "They took my words about death and salvation, intended to assist in my escape, as calls for sacrifice. I will admit the attention was appreciated enough I did little to dissuade them, and as their numbers dwindled, I granted them power so that news of me could spread."

"Why did you allow it?" Hinata felt a nauseous pit form in her gut. "Why did you stay with them instead of reaching out to someone else?"

"So they could form a different cult? Little girl, you greatly underestimate the allure of actual contact with a higher being. As for why I allowed it, why not? At least the world knew of me, revered me, praised me. I spent millennia after millennia alone and forgotten. Do you know how painful that is? To give so much and end up with nothing? You may not now, but wait the years out, tell me how it feels that your tribulations and suffering become little more than myths and children's tales - if you are fortunate enough to gain even that. What of the thousands of faceless minions who die seconds into a war? They have nothing."

Jashin swung his arm out wide.

"I am the embodiment of the forgotten! I have been left with nothing. I will take everything! Choose now my blessed winners. Fight for me as my prized warriors, or resist, and become mere tools that I keep locked away in the earth until I wish to use you."

Hinata let her special mixture of reiryoku flood every fiber as Lee awakened his zanpakuto. Jashin's past was irrelevant in the face of who he was today. Unfortunate, even tragic, no one deserved to be

tossed aside and forgotten. She had been there. All of her team had been. Maybe several lifetimes' worth would change her mind, but right now, her ancestor threatened everyone she cared for.

He needed to be stopped.

"Fair enough." Jashin shrugged his shoulders. "Children do remain defiant when lacking wisdom."

A chain shot out from his sleeve and snagged the hilt of his cruel blade. A wrathful smile contorted his face into the visage of a demon as he swung wide. The weapon moved so fast it left a trail of dust and afterimage in its wake. Lee and Hinata blocked only for it to roughly knock them both aside.

"I'm going now."

Ichigo shifted the trench coat of his Bankai so it fit perfectly over his shoulders and pulled Zangetsu out of the still frozen earth.

"You woke up barely five minutes ago." Karin held her scarred forearm out for Rukia to bite down again. "Hinata and Lee are handling the jerk for right now. After I make sure Rukia and Sado are stable enough to move, I'll help boost your and Uryu's reiryoku wells."

Despite her determined look, her paling skin and clammy sheen told him she didn't have much left. Twice now, he'd caught her eyes becoming half-lidded like she would pass out. Uryu was hurting, and he claimed she'd already healed him. Rukia and Sado were barely hanging on as it was.

"No, I'll be okay. These two need you to keep healing them. The fact my Shihakusho is more or less intact means my spiritual power is pretty much back to full."

"We should get going then." Uryu climbed to his feet. "I sense that those two are fighting Jashin on a relatively even field. We should jump in before they tire and we lose the advantage."

"You need to stay here and protect everyone."

"If one of us has to stay, it should be you. I can handle Jashin myself." Uryu glanced down at their unconscious companions. "You carry the only means we have making it to the other side. And maybe more importantly, you probably shouldn't be… pushing yourself."

Ichigo bit down on the guilt and buried the tightness in his chest.

"I won't hollowfy this time."

"So your inner-hollow says."

"He had complete control over my body, but I stopped attacking Nel before you figured out the mask needed to be shattered. Why would he give that up just to try and take me over again?"

"A fair point, but regardless-"

"Let me do this." Ichigo stared down at his sword as knuckles whitened from the clenching grip. "Let me start making up for all my failures by getting everyone out of here."

Uryu hesitated for a moment, but didn't turn away as Ichigo's sincere gaze met his scrutiny.

"If you go berserk again, my next arrow is going in your brain."

Ichigo grinned.

"Good."

The Substitute launched himself high into the air and raced over the landscape below. His reiatsu had stabilized, bringing his control back

to where it should have been all along. Honestly, it felt weird not having some sudden new strength like he normally did whenever he wound up in his inner-world. He kind of liked it this way though. It meant Zangetsu and his hollow had some level of faith in him. They may be the only ones who ultimately did.

Rukia, Chad, Nel; he wanted to apologize so badly. Seeing them so damaged and knowing some aspect of him caused that made bile coat the back of his throat. Would they blame him for losing control? Would they say he hurt them?

Would they hate him?

"Keep focused. If I mope, my control will go to- well this place."

Coming over the ridge, he spotted Jashin dodge a slash from Hinata and block Lee's burning fist with the flat of his sword. Unleashing his reiatsu to maximum, Ichigo dove down in a barely seen blur. The master of Hell flung Lee away and blocked Ichigo's strike, the two swords sparking and emitting an ear-piercing metallic screech.

"Ready for another bath so soon, young man?"

Spines shot out from the blade, but Ichigo vanished and struck again from the side. Jashin blocked it as Hinata rushed up from behind and speared for the back of his neck. The ancient man ducked, attempting to skewer her with Zangetsu. She vaulted off it and slammed her palm down, releasing a wave of chakra and sending him flipping back. Lee soared down like a lightning bolt and brought both fists down. Jashin placed his sword in the way, shielding him from the blow even as the ground gave out beneath his feet.

Ichigo stabbed for his gut. A dozen chains shot up and entangled the strike as Jashin's spines formed a box around Lee. Gritting his teeth, Ichigo wrenched his sword free, leapt over Jashin, and bisected the cage. Jashin spun and deflected another of Hinata's attacks.

"I tire of you always sneaking behind me, granddaughter."

She bent back under a horizontal slash, a reiryoku strand emerging from her foot and whipping up into his chin. More chains came from the ground, spiraling into a twister. The links caught each one by a stray limb and slammed them all into the ground then flung them as a group into a large boulder. The three bodies crashed into the stone and tumbled apart.

Ichigo rolled into a crouch as the other two struggled to get their knees under them.

They're exhausted.

"Do not have such a worried expression, Ichigo-kun. We still have great amounts of strength left." Lee forced himself to his feet. "Keep your eyes on him."

"Yes, please do." Jashin held out an open hand. "Three of you are a little too much for this to remain playful."

"Genjutsu." Hinata tried to get in front of him, but her legs gave out. "Ichigo, close your eyes!"

"Too late, granddaughter."

Naruto dropped out of his Shunshin directly in front of Ichigo and held his zanpakuto out in front of him. Pressing his palm against the flat of the kunai blade, it shimmered.

"Shin!"

Jashin's eyes glassed over for a moment. He quickly gripped his face with a frown and glared daggers between his fingers.

"What did you do?"

"I reflected your illusion back on you." An unfamiliar grin graced Naruto's lips as strange, nearly glowing, red eyes stared down at him victoriously. "Mumyo-Jinpuu Ryuu Satsujin Ken doesn't consist of many techniques, but all of them are at the top of the pile. Whatever

illusion you throw at me, I can throw it back in your face. It will work even if it fully takes hold. Go ahead, try it."

His reiatsu pulsed out and took on a visibly red aura. Unlike the simple energy it normally contained, powerful emotions laced every particle of it.

It's like rage in physical form.

"Naruto-kun?" Hinata teetered slightly with each step as she approached him.

"He's playing with the fur-ball so it doesn't get out of line again. We recognized this dick-bag was using genjutsu. Your boyfriend doesn't have anything to counter it and since I didn't have time to teach this to him yet." The grin became more menacing. "I was let out to have a little fun."

"But, Naruto's body is-"

"Stand back, kiddies. Let me show you how a real fight looks!"

"Hey." Ichigo placed a hand on his shoulder. "Can you make sure I don't get caught in that illusion?"

"Well, yeah, he's going to be dead in a few moments."

"I mean if I fight him and you stay back."

Naruto's face soured.

"I've fought with my body in worse condition and this punk's is surprisingly just as tough. Besides, I never backed down from a fight - and I always win."

"I'm not asking you to back down. I'm asking to take the first shot at him."

The man inhabiting Naruto's body quirked an eyebrow as Ichigo stepped in front of him. He wasn't trying to coddle any of them. All three of them were more than capable of continuing the battle. However, there wasn't any reason to risk them getting killed because they got worn down. Besides, somebody needed to be awake enough to carry everyone else out.

"Ichigo-kun, we should attack as a group." Lee made a fist. "We are assured victory with the four of us working together."

"We're assured victory if you let me kill him." Kyo sighed and wandered over to Hinata. "Go ahead, kid. I'll keep the guy fighting honest and let you take a shot at him. Just make it quick. If I get bored, I may cut you down the same time I do him."

"Sure thing." Ichigo readied Zangetsu as red and black reiryoku surged from hilt to tip. "If any of you see an opening, go for it. Getting everyone out of here safely is more important than my pride."

"Don't crap out and you should be able to win by yourself and protect everyone."

"Ichigo, he possesses an extraordinary range of vision that can't be obscured. His only blind spot is directly behind the vertebra on the back of the neck." Hinata pointed to the spot on her body. "He knows that, but it might give you an opening to attack."

Kyo appraised Hinata from the corner of his eye.

"The punk has good taste. If I didn't already have my Yuya, I'd probably fool around with you."

"Um, wha- what?"

"By the way, in case you were curious, if the punk has any form of stamina, you should be very happy."

Hinata became an unhealthy shade of red.

"Heh, virgins."

Ichigo brought the blade to the side as he bolted ahead and swung across.

"Getsuga Arashi!"

Twenty-three individual crescents, each over ten feet tall, burst from the slash in a serial wave. Jashin summoned a spider-web of chain and spine to shield him. It nullified the first few, but cracks in the links quickly formed as the pressure continued to climb, each blast slamming into the defense a moment after the prior one. The final four shattered the barrier, stampeding over Jashin.

Ichigo vanished in a Shunpo and dove straight through the destruction, driving the Master of Hell out into the open air. His calculated strikes blurred in a frenzy as Jashin struggled to keep up.

"We've done this already, young man." The teeth began to shift into the black spines. "Don't you remember how this ends?"

The Substitute struck down, sheering the morphing teeth off one side of the blade.

"I remember." He glided away from the other set. "I'm also starting to get an idea of how your abilities work."

"Oh?"

The teen descended and stabbed upward. Jashin floated higher and Ichigo released another blast from the point, the wave carrying his opponent higher. Zigzagging up by springing off vertical platforms of self-constructed reishi, Ichigo lashed out with every pass, forcing Jashin to maneuver his chains in a hasty block as his sword struggled to hold the climbing Getsuga Tensho back.

Ichigo leapt above him, and then sprang back with a tight spin as more energy gathered on his sword. With a shout, he delivered a

two-handed smash against the chains. The added pressure from the infused reiryoku shattered the links, and while Jashin managed to shift around enough to deny a direct hit, the force sent him rocketing down into the earth hundreds of feet below.

A gigantic plume of dust and debris bloomed up as Ichigo landed. His hands blistered from the strength of his blows as he gradually tried to get his breathing back under control. Keeping a fast pace was his best chance to winning. The trick behind Jashin's chains and spines derived from his focus.

It clicked when he realized that the more he, Hinata, and Lee swarmed him, the weaker those extensions became. It meant he created them with his reiryoku and couldn't make them unbreakable when forced to constantly react to another attack.

The cloud cleared as Jashin's oppressive reiatsu swept out across the plateau like a wind carried fog. Jashin steadily walked out of the crater, casually brushing a few patches of dirt off the frayed rags that once made up his high-collared coat. A large fracture ran up the center of his sword, but the edges held firm

"Continuing my question, what have you figured out? That I conjure these things and their strength depends upon time and attention?" He manifested four small links in his palm. "Very insightful, but do you understand how yet?"

"You shape the reishi using your reiryoku."

"No, this gift of mine is nothing so bland as that." Jashin dispelled the chain in his fist. "My energy's affinity lies predominately with a Yin nature, an essential component for creating genjutsu. Do you know of genjutsu, young man?"

"I know that guy is making sure you can't use it." Ichigo tilted his head over toward the Kyo possessed Naruto.

"Genjutsu essentially manifests my thoughts within another person's mind. It is the basis of creating something from nothing. Yet, you will surely ask how this leads to the creation of physical constructs." Jashin opened his hand as solid black reiryoku bled out of his palm. "My mother passed many gifts onto my brother and I. While he received her two most powerful doujutsu and immense chakra, I received the all seeing eye and perhaps her most frightening ability - will materialization."

The energy whipped into a small vortex and he shoved his hand forward, a funnel of shrieking black wind engulfing Ichigo and shredding the top half of his Shihakusho as it sent him tumbling and skidding across the ground.

"It is no where near as potent as mother's. Of course, nothing ever was. However, you can see mine is adequate." Jashin smeared a coat of the pitch over the surface of his blade, repairing the crack. "How did you think I came to control this place rather than being another mere prisoner tortured for all eternity? You claim to understand my birthright. Ichigo Kurosaki, you fail to grasp even the vapors of my true prowess. You face the powers of creation itself."

Ichigo rolled and unleashed a lightning fast arc. Jashin batted it away and rushed the teen. Blocking over his shoulder, Ichigo grunted and deflected the blow as Jashin readied another wind beam.

"Getsuga Toride."

The obsidian wind collided with an unmoving wall of red and black reiryoku.

"Easy enough to surmount."

Like a giant's ribcage hundreds of spines curved out from Jashin's sword, stretching out around the energy shield and encroaching upon the teen.

"Getsuga." Ichigo made a horizontal swipe, the energy fusing with the wall. "Jujisho!"

The cross shaped blast nearly overwhelmed Jashin as the air rumbled and quakes rippled across the plateau. The tips of the spines swelled and erupted, surrounding Ichigo as the twin Getsuga won out against Jashin. Torrents of wind and chaotic energy obscured the clash as attacks and combatants all became caught in the explosion.

Jashin leapt out of the chaotic dome of destruction, ragged and nearly crazed.

"Do you really think I don't know you're behind me, Ichigo? I don't have to see you to know my blind spot is the only place you could be!"

He whirled around with a stab, but Ichigo was already face to face. He grabbed Jashin by the throat as they began to fall back into the still raging mass of energies.

"Do you really think I wouldn't hide my full speed until the end, knowing you could track my every movement?"

His arm stretched out wide, Ichigo sliced Jashin across the belly, unleashing a titanic wave that consumed the man entirely. Only a fading scream could be heard as the blast extinguished the chaos below and completely severed the battlefield in half. The destabilized cliff-facing side slowly fell away from the anchored portion, toppling into the rivers of lava.

The Substitute landed and his knees gave out, crunching in the rubble. Had he ever been this exhausted in his life? Hurt? Certainly worse. But tired? Honestly, he had wondered if that had even been possible.

He grinned as Naruto came up to him.

"Not bad, kid. The punk who runs this body is actually doing a decent job with you."

Ichigo decided to take it as a compliment and climbed to his feet. Lee pumped his fist in the air as Hinata strayed behind with her chin buried in her coat.

I didn't think people could blush that badly.

"What's wrong with her?"

Kyo shrugged and Hinata almost disappeared entirely behind the fluffy collar of her zanpakuto.

"Alright, I better get back before the fleabag eats the dumbass." The spirit stretched in Naruto's body with a groan. "Wished I'd gotten a chance to knock some people around a bit."

The distinct red eyes faded back to the normal clear blue. Naruto blinked a few times and glanced around at his surroundings. A near glowing blush struck his cheeks and he spun around to face Hinata.

"Hinata do- don't believe a damn word that bastard said." He waved his arms frantically. "I mean some of it's true, but a lot of it is completely exaggerated or an outright lie. We'll wait until he's out of my head before - yeah. And don't take any of his suggestions or - or… you've already fainted haven't you?"

Crown Clown vanished and she slumped into his chest. He scooped her up as panic washed over his face.

"Hinata?"

"She is simply exhausted, Naruto-kun." Lee helped steady Ichigo as he started to tip. "Fighting to victory against the plant man and Sasuke Uchiha with little rest would be tiring enough, but she almost immediately engaged Jashin after soundly defeating the traitor.

Regretfully, she had to make up for my fatigue from using the gates. I'm sure Kyo teasing her had little to do with her falling asleep."

"Right." Making sure she was secure, he nodded at Ichigo. "You know where the others are right?"

"Yeah."

"You can fill me in on our current situation as we travel. The atmosphere in this place is killing our recovery and we don't know what other jackass could show up to give us trouble. Besides, the longer you and I stay, the more likely it is we'll have to deal with our resident spirits."

It felt almost like a memory. His smell and the ease she felt riding on his warm back as he leapt from one point to the next. It was too vivid. The sensations were too real and her feelings for him had deepened so much more than the excitement of being able to eat ramen beside him that first time.

That kid is completely devoted to you. He doesn't even realize the lengths he will go to for you - it even makes the fox wary. He might seem overprotective, but deep down, he considers you an equal. All the fear is really him not wanting either of you to face an enemy alone again. As much as he whines about keeping you safe, the truth is, he would never come rescue you, but he'd tear this place apart a hundred times just so he could fight beside you.

Kyo never took his eyes off the fight as he spoke, almost like he didn't want to acknowledge he said anything.

Is he okay, Kyo-san?

He's better.

I worry I don't do enough.

What you do is more than anyone else could. Being who you are perfectly compliments him. His grin became more mischievous. *As for doing more in a hopefully mutually enjoyable fashion, you kids will get to that point eventually. I'd plan on not doing much else for about a month. He's got this one idea to-*

"I don't care if you agree or not." Naruto's voice interrupted the memory. "We don't have a clue what's waiting for us around the next corner or what state my world could be in. We have two people so badly injured we can't heal them and the rest of us are exhausted. Carrying them along is asking for someone to wind up dead."

"And sending them back up four levels of Hell, with the chance those Akatsuki guys resurrect, is a better plan?" She cracked an eye open, peeking over Naruto's shoulder. Ichigo had dropped out of his Bankai and bandaged the skin torn up by Jashin's wind attack. Sitting on a rock, he fumed and swung his arm out. "That's a stupid plan."

"I'm not suggesting that." Naruto kept his tone neutral even as she felt muscles tense in his shoulders. "Karin has enough strength left to perk Nel up a bit. She can use a Garganta to take everyone back. You, Lee, and Hinata will come with me to Konoha."

"And how do you suppose you'll get back?" Uryu tapped his glasses up to the ridge of his nose. "Did Urahara provide you with a transportation devise we're not aware of?"

"We don't need to come back right away. Chances are we can hijack a ride from the Earl or any hollow forces there."

"Assuming it isn't an elaborate plan to trap you on that side."

"That is a risk, but the odds are still better than ignoring our situation and being dropped in the middle of another battle. Believe me; you guys have proven you're awesome. I'd feel a lot more confident running into Akatsuki or someone else with the full group."

Ichigo hopped up from his spot on the rock.

"Let's wait and give them a chance to recover. Chad's tough and Rukia being a Shinigami means she can recover from things that would normally be fatal."

Hinata activated her vision and scanned every member of their team. It only took her a second to realize Naruto had made the correct call.

"You don't understand how badly they're hurt, Ichigo." Naruto quickly let her down and she walked to the center of the group. "Rukia and Sado are not getting better on their own and Karin-san is already dangerously tired. You aren't much better, Uryu, despite trying to hide it."

"I'm fine."

"You haven't seen your blood."

He cringed and looked away in frustration.

"We don't know for certain if what Urahara-san provided us will work, which means no one could heal you on the other side. This is outside the range of both my and Karin-san's capabilities. You need Seireitei's medical division and likely Unohana-san's direct care."

Ichigo's face fell as realization slowly crept onto it.

"We don't know how fast those guys will revive and whether they'll be back at full power." Naruto made the cross fingered seal and summoned a handful of Kage Bunshin. "Nel, I'm counting on you to get everyone back. Have Urahara see if he can get a signal on Ichigo's tracker."

"Okay." She mumbled tiredly as Samehada picked her up by the back of her collar. "Be safe."

"I'm sorry." Ichigo clenched his fists by his sides. "Uryu, please tell them I'm sorry."

"You can tell them yourself when you get back. Although, this isn't really something you should feel guilty about. We knew the risks your inner-hollow posed." The Quincy sighed as the gateway opened. "This may work out for the best. You'll inevitably end up trapped so I should remain in our world where the actual fighting will occur. I have a score to settle with Aizen's forces."

"It's settled then." Naruto gave Ichigo a punch in the arm. "Wake Lee up from his nap. We need to get out of here as quickly as we can."

Gaara rolled his eyes as yet another trio of low ranking Shinigami failed to grasp the basic idea of teamwork and were swept up by his sand and dumped unceremoniously on the ground. These men and women were well intentioned and obviously attempting to try and work together. The concept simply didn't click.

"Your mannerisms speak plainly." Yamamoto slowly strode up with his cane and stood next to the captain. "This experiment will not work."

"I disagree."

"So the other groups have been more successful?"

"No, not at all." Gaara faced the Commander directly. "However, this is not a matter that can cleanly be decided in an afternoon. You are asking them to use a particular skill set, that bluntly, is nearly the exact opposite of all their training."

"Go on."

"In the ninja world, students are trained together from a young age. They are taught to work with one another. This is further developed when they are formed into an actual team under a jonin sensei. Each member of a three man squad carves out a role within the unit and learns how to best key off of a teammate. If one person strikes high, the other strikes low. Their moves compliment each other."

Gaara motioned to the crowd cleaning sand out of their clothes and rubbing bruises.

"Everything they have learned since the Shinigami Academy has been about personal development. Yes, they fight alongside each other as a mass force and stand back to back effectively, but what they can't do, is layer their abilities. Essentially, one plus one equals two. With a true team, the sum becomes greater than the individual parts."

"So for this to truly work, we would need to implement it at an introductory level."

"Yes." Gaara folded his arms over his chest. "I wouldn't replace what is currently in place either. Ideally, you would train every student in both individual and team tactics. Then, at the time of graduation, both they and the recruiters would have an idea of what role they would best serve."

"So we wouldn't find resistance against the Eleventh Division and their pride in only fighting one on one, nor would we risk not finding powerful captains in the future,"

"Yes. In my original world, the strongest ninja still became revered as individuals, but were able to seamlessly integrate into a team if necessary." The old man hummed contemplatively as Gaara's sand retracted back around his feet. "I would recommend we acquire volunteers. The biggest obstacle is getting them to think about interactive teamwork. So, let them divide themselves into teams of three. It will get them thinking about possible combinations. If only a handful of teams are created, it will still boost our strength and should reduce the losses from any future large scale attacks."

"You've drawn many conclusions in the few hours since this started."

A small speck of worry pricked in the back of Gaara's mind. Testing everyone made him fall into his old position as leader of a village. It'd felt so natural he hadn't even realized the demeanor carried over into

his conversation with his superior. Granted, Yamamoto-dono did have him here for his expertise on the subject and he shouldn't be afraid to voice his findings. Already giving recommendations, considering it meant drastic changes, to the man who founded and developed the Academy from nothing, required a little more reverence.

Baki always did berate me for not being more tactful with foreign dignitaries.

"As Kazekage, team organization fell under my responsibilities and I got carried away." Gaara bowed low. "I apologize if I overstepped my bounds and was disrespectful."

"Were your words born from ignorance or arrogance, you would have been. However, having experienced your original world's training and our own Academy, you are the only one who can properly compare the two." Yamamoto gave a small nod of respect. "I value your counsel in this matter."

Gaara bowed low again.

"Thank you for your trust. How do you wish to continue?"

"Proceed with your recommendation on finding volunteers. I will leave this matter in your hands. Should you find some measure of success, we shall consider restructuring the Academy syllabus in the futu-"

"Gaara-taicho!" One of his subordinates raced up to them in a panic. "The Hell party has returned by way of Nel Tu's Garganta."

He took to the air instantly, bounding over rooftops and clearing huge swaths of the city in single steps. They'd left only this morning and the horizon's orange glow had barely started to signal dusk. Had they made it to the other side in under ten hours? It shouldn't be possible. Did they fail?

Did anyone die?

He landed as medical Shinigami raced around. Yamamoto sat quietly to the side like he'd been there from the beginning.

"If you need to frantically rush off, you should at least possess the speed to make up for your lack of decorum."

"I apologize, Sotaicho."

One of the many Naruto's ran up to them and gave a quick salute.

"Boss said I needed to find you,Gaara, and fill you in."

"You're a clone?"

"Yep. He says not to worry about us and we're on our way back to Konoha." Bunshin stuck out his bottom lip. "Of course, I don't know if he managed to. We sorta left before he actually resumed finding the exit."

"Resumed?" Yamamoto's raised an eyebrow.

Bunshin frowned.

"Ran into the Akatsuki and some bastard named Jashin who basically ran the place."

"I do not recognize those names."

"The Akatsuki were powerful criminals responsible for our deaths." Gaara felt a chill run up his spine as he remembered his death at the hands of the foul mouthed one. "I do not know who Jashin is."

"Basically, another guy using his past to justify why he deserves to rule the world and make everyone miserable. Ichigo beat him after some problems." The clone glanced over as the wounded and fatigued were tended to. "Both boss and him were temporarily controlled by Jashin and our… tenets made a mess of things."

"So their wounds were from you two?"

"It's a mixed bag honestly. Everyone saved everyone."

"What was the state of Naruto Uzumaki and the others prior to your extraction?" Yamamoto asked.

"Beat up and tired, but still going strong as long as they don't have to deal with any more surprises on the same level as Jashin. They were trying to get out quick before everyone revived and wanted to start a round two." Bunshin's face scrunched up in confusion. "Or would it be round three?"

"How do they plan to return now that their transportation is here?"

"Oh yeah!" Bunshin tapped his fist into his open hand. "Get me that Kisuke Urahara guy."

Small specks of blood dripped from the edge of the tan cloth, each droplet smashing onto the dusty broken ground - an hourglass, keeping time to the final moments of life. Matted brown hair rested against a broken concrete wall as deep shaking breaths echoed across the desolate streets.

A lone brown eye stared forward unwaveringly through the broken rims of black sunglasses. The invisible assailants that had tormented him were slowly starting to take shape with each red drop carrying him closer to death.

They were monsters, demonic beasts with glowing eyes and otherworldly snarls. Nothing had worked against them. No jutsu or weapon had scratched them. No block or hiding place had deterred them. No one had found a way to stop them. The last message from foreign villages had been hours ago, and relayed a tale of hopelessness.

He was the only one left. Instinctually, no perhaps even spiritually, he knew there was no one else. His beautiful lover and their child - both long since taken from him. Konoha had long been enveloped in the silence of the night, its broken buildings hidden within the starless black sky.

Shino turned and rested his back against the wall. His healing bugs desperately trying to close the wound diving from shoulder to deep within his chest and back. Deeper than bone, the wound was beyond his colony's capabilities. Now, all they were doing was consuming chakra and hastening what he already knew was inevitable.

Shrieks chorused above him in a symphony of excitement.

They'd found him.

Pushing himself off the wall, he steadied himself for his final confrontation. Such a futile act, but not fighting remained out of the question. It would only leave everyone disappointed when he met them in the next world.

They surrounded him quickly. Beings of various shapes and sizes, they blurred between physical form and translucency. They watched him hungrily, predators anticipating the moment their prey fell. Sunken yellow eyes glowed upon pure white masks, as steaming breaths with the stench of rotting meat billowed out onto the cracked street.

"Good evening."

Every syllable was enunciated cheerfully, the tone seemingly oblivious to the deathly atmosphere.

Shino looked up at the voice. His eye widened a fraction as he clearly took in the figure hovering in the air for the first time. An umbrella clasped firmly in his gloved hand, the round man's skin was potent grey offset by impossibly white teeth turned up in a disproportionately gigantic cruel smile. The man, no, the creature

was adorned in strange clothes and radiated an air of pure malice despite the seemingly jovial look he sported.

So, this was the being who struck him from behind while the other creatures distracted him.

"Would you please be so kind as to attend my wedding?"

Shino remained silent as the figure floated lower to the ground. The thing's jaw moved even as his teeth never came apart, resulting in a muffled sloshing sound every time he spoke.

"Did my pets hurt your ears?"

"No." Shino ignored the chaotic buzzing of his hysteric colonies. "I was merely stunned. Why, you ask? Because I did not think creature's like you could speak."

The strange figure laughed through his teeth.

"I'm not a creature, merely their master." He leaned his head in close and tilted it. "Now, would you please attend my wedding?"

"If you are these creatures' master, you are the one responsible for all of this. Why should I go to your wedding instead of trying to kill you?"

The fat creature laughed loudly which spurred on the other monsters who were now almost startlingly clear.

It made Shino's skin crawl.

"My little bug." Dangerous yellow eyes gleamed manically behind the creature's glasses. "The only one killed here tonight is you."

The creature whirled around and the monsters started to creep forward.

"You will make a fine addition to the guest list, Shino-kun."

Shino's mouth twisted into a frown.

"How do you know my name?"

"It is important for the wedding party to know the bride's friends." A single eye glanced over his shoulder. "I am so thankful that you are going to attend."

The monsters lunged with unbridled hungry and ravaging fury. Shino barely had the chance to gasp as the first set of teeth sunk deep into his flesh and ripped. Dozens more joined in, and he felt the gentle caress of oblivion seep into him like cold as they tore at him.

The figure stared up into the dark sky as the sharp sounds of the armor type bugs slowly snapping free of each other filled the air.

"Yes, I am so very grateful. The guest list will soon be complete. It will be a perfect wedding for you won't it - my Hinata?"

"Get the hell away from him!"

The Earl's head snapped around, only for Naruto to bury a Rasengan in his face and send him crashing into the closest building. Hinata and Lee zipped within the pack of monsters, fending them off of Shino as a young man with orange hair cut down any escaping into the sky.

Am I dreaming?

"Naruto-kun, toss me the scroll." The strange claws and raiment disappeared as she caught the parchment and unsealed its contents. "Hold on, Shino-kun."

The orange haired kid leaned over him with a green tint to his skin.

"Holy shi-"

"Ichigo, help Naruto. Lee-san, stand guard. Once the pill takes effect, I'm going to begin healing him. Hopefully with his insects…" She

trailed off and put something in his mouth as healing chakra formed in her hands.

"How's he doing, Hinata?"

The hallucination really does sound like Naruto.

"I've administered the conversion pill." Concern etched itself in every contour of her face until it suddenly lit up. "It's working!"

"I cannot state my disappointment in you strongly enough, Naruto."

The Earl's glasses and teeth shown from within shadows as he stalked out of the hole in the wall. "By dragging her into Hell and bringing her here, it is obvious you learned nothing from our last encounter. It is clear you will continue to sacrifice her instead of protecting her like you should!"

Naruto blasted forward as his body melded into a Shunshin. The rotund creature hopped to the side as the tip of the strange kunai barely missed.

"Mizuchi."

Razor sharp winds spiraled around the Earl, lacerating its rubbery skin in a hundred places.

"I see the samurai has been teaching you a few of his tricks."

"Something like that." Naruto appeared behind him. "Odama Rasengan!"

The Earl spun and clashed into the large spiraling sphere with an orb of dark energy. The attacks struggled against one another for a moment with Naruto's ultimately winning. However, the Earl used the knockback to propel him to safety, his umbrella riding the updraft high into the sky.

"If anything that samurai had could defeat me, this would have been over centuries ago." The creature laughed as the wind carried him further into the night. "I'll let you get settled in for now since I'm sure you had a very long trip."

He gestured wide at the village.

"Welcome home."

Author's Notes:

One of my proof readers had a question about where Kyo's "power level" sat in regards to the other characters, since he seemed so confident he could deal with Jashin (as well as his normal bouts with Kyubi). Part of that is his personality, even when outclassed, he's sure he will find a way to crush his opponent. The larger part, and the source of that confidence, stems from what he can do - more so than energy quantity.

Chakra/reiryoku-wise, he's not very exceptional, easily outclassed by many other characters. His speed and physical abilities are in the same range as an un-boosted (Shunshin/ Sage/ Fox) Naruto. However, for those of you who haven't read the manga, his techniques are unbelievably lethal. The common one we see, the Kyubi stunning Mizuchi, is his weakest. Each advanced technique only stacks and becomes drastically stronger and more destructive from there.

This doesn't mean he's stronger than everyone. They honestly all kind of stay around the same level with their individual strengths and weaknesses. However, for those not expecting such a potent and unique move-set, it is not uncommon for an adversary to quickly find themselves missing vital pieces.

Anyway, curious how everyone will receive Ichigo's expanded move pool and the overall final match against Jashin. I had wanted to reveal them sooner, to cement the fact he developed them under

Naruto and not acquired them as a sudden power-up, but I hope that was thoroughly explained as due to his hollow's interference.

I tweaked the Shino scene so it didn't come across quite so final as when I had it as a glimpse to this story.

I believe that is everything and hope everyone (who celebrates it) had a good Thanksgiving.

See you next week.

Sunlight

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 18

Naruto absently kicked his feet out so the swing rocked gently back and forth. The ruins of the academy smoldered in front of him, framing the dilapidated buildings and crumbling structures further in the village. His apartment, the Hokage tower, freaking Ichiraku's, all of them completely destroyed or so damaged gravity would finish them off in days.

It resonated so deeply with his memories of Kyubi's final rampage and how Konoha burned. In some ways, this was worse. Cold, lifeless, it felt like Konoha never rebuilt and found peace after he died, like the fires ended and still no one came home He knew they did, Shikamaru's lazy mug on the monument proved that, but the absence of natural progression still made his heart ache.

And I said I didn't care.

"Shino has stabilized. His new generation of healing Kikaichu has already acclimated to consuming pure spirit energy and have taken over. I only have to make sure he doesn't run out of reiryoku and he should be fine by morning."

"That's the best thing I've heard in a while." Naruto titled his head over his shoulder and smiled at Hinata. "Want to sit?"

"I don't know if I should trust you being near me after everything Kyo-san said."

He blushed furiously as a rant bubbled up in his chest. She gave him that smile of hers, where she closed her eyes and loving sincerity lit up her entire face. It killed the tirade at the tip of his tongue.

You will continue to sacrifice her instead of protecting her like you should!

"We owe that Urahara guy. Converting charka into pure spiritual energy and making their bodies capable of using it will save a lot of lives." Naruto stood up and brushed the dust off his butt. "Even these fake bodies are pretty cool. Although, it feels weird being human and not using chakra."

"You have to think of them as a shell for our souls rather than actual human bodies. I'm grateful he provided us with the kind that allows us to still fight to our fullest like the one he wears. I don't think he gives that brand out to many people"

"Yeah. It was a good idea. It'll be a lot easier talking to people like this than haunting them and trying to shove pills down their throats." He stretched his arms behind his head. "Is there anyone left here?"

"No - just remains."

"When I scouted around, I saw traces of a special seal. It looks like it built off of the Yondaime's Hiraishin. They could have had a city wide warp. It really wouldn't be too - Hinata."

Even with her hands over her face, it was easy to see the tears dripping from her chin.

"There's so many, Naruto. At least with the Kyubi it ate its victims. This is- it's so much worse… gruesome. Entire shelters were overrun and slaughtered. Unlike that time, they couldn't run or hide. Tsunade-sensei wasn't around to send them healing energy and protect them. They could only be afraid and fight against something untouchable."

"I know."

His voice came out softly as his own emotions threatened to surface. No, he'd been the weepy one enough lately. He needed to be the supportive one now. She took a shuddering breath and wiped her face dry. The moment had passed and her ninja demeanor had kicked back in. They always did that didn't they? Push everything aside because letting it get to you compromised your focus. You can cry after the threat has ended. When really, it never did.

You will continue to sacrifice her instead of protecting her like you should.

"Why is he doing this? He made sure Aizen got the headband to us. Is this to trap us here or is there more?"

"I've been thinking about it since Gaara told me about hollow behavior. You, Lee, Gaara, and I are supposedly captain level in terms of power right? Now, I know we have these special zanpakuto and were really strong when were more alive, but ignoring those things, we still had developed chakra which automatically makes us stronger than most people."

"It makes all ninja stronger than most people."

"Exactly, so suppose instead of moving on completely or coming to Seireitei, their souls were consumed by hollows."

"They would become a potent fuel source, evolving the hollow into a stronger form."

He nodded with a scowl.

"This is about strengthening Aizen's army. There's probably more to it than that, but it would explain at least why they came here."

"Why tell us?"

"As much as I hate believing in destiny, we know we're fighting the Earl. I read a little of Yamamoto's journal and I'm convinced that guy

from our world who made Soul Society was the Rikudo Sennin after he died."

Hinata's eyes went wide as her mouth dropped slightly.

"His soul found a way to cross between our worlds. That's why he never came for Jashin. He died fighting the Earl."

"Makes sense."

"But how did he find a way between and why has there never been anyone else since?"

"I can't begin to guess at specifics, but I think I have an idea for why things are happening now." Naruto patted his belly where the seal used to house the fox. "The Shinigami from our world was a hollow. I'm sure of it."

"So when you killed it, you opened the gate? That seems…"

"Unlikely, sure, until you think about how the Sennin sealed the Ten-tails by his own will. The Shiki Fujin never existed at that time, which means neither did the fake Shinigami. There are seals I learned of that use another being's life force as a kind of lock for something. The Earl has not been able to come to our world until we showed up, and no one has crossed from our world until I destroyed that hollow."

"Which means it reopened the gate and allowed the Earl in. He'd obviously claim it for himself and prevent us from using it even if we had discovered it earlier."

"And he'd probably know Hell was a connecting point. Hinata, the trap wasn't coming here. The trap was Hell and we beat it."

A skeleton burst out of the boiling mud with a gasp as it fought against the chains dragging it down. Sinews of muscle formed over the frame followed by pale skin. Black hair sprouted from a bare

scalp as vocal chords allowed the silent scream to catch and echo off the many cliffs of Hell.

Sasuke Uchiha had revived.

"Such a willful cry. To resurrect so quickly without the use of the altar is a testament to your tenacity." The voice chuckled as Sasuke slipped off some more chains and stood. "You outpace even the man I instilled as the master of this place."

"Hn."

"Are you tired of wallowing in the mud after every defeat?"

Blood red Sharingan whirled to life and glared hatefully at the shadows.

"Mocking me is unwise, especially when I'm in a bad mood."

"Such hatred, ooh the chills I get seeing such rage. It is a pity your eyes are so underdeveloped."

Sasuke quirked an eyebrow as curiosity surpassed anger.

"You talk like you know about the Mangekyo."

"I know many things both wonderful and terrible." The voice giggled. "I can give you the means to awaken your full potential and free you from this place."

"Grand promises. What do you want in return?"

"You see, I have lost my shadow and would like a temporary replacement. Plus, there is a certain boy I want killed at a time of my choosing."

"How long is temporary?"

"Oh not very long. Everything should be done within a week. Help me finish up a few final tasks, kill who I say to, and you are free to your whims."

"If I agree, what proof do I have?"

"My new friend, I am the Earl of Millennium." The rotund man emerged from the shadows and malicious purple flame danced over his hand. "And I always speak the truth."

He clutched the links burrowing into flesh. The flames grew brighter as the Earl began to slowly rip the chains out and Sasuke screamed.

Lee gently tapped the training log in the center of the familiar outcropping deep in the forest. How many times had he struck it? How much of his blood, sweat, and tears had been absorbed into its wooden surface? This spot is where Gai-sensei hardened his resolve time after time. It is where he met his first team.

Walking around the log a medium sized tree swayed in the wind.

"You've grown, old friend."

He brushed his hand within the leaves. The once tiny sapling had become a strong and vibrant tree. Unlike the other trees, it remained unmarred by weapon marks or fists. While it was one of the more obscure training spots, it still housed visitors on occasion.

Something nestled amongst the roots caught his attention. Bending down, a small photo, shielded by glass, had been embedded in the ground. His lips quivered as his eyes adjusted well enough to see. He and Neji stood side by side completely covered in dirt as Tenten smiled vibrantly at the camera. Gai-sensei stood behind them with his hands on Neji and his shoulders.

It had been his final sparing match with Neji - the final test of his improved training regimen. His first rival had requested the event

personally. It had been a brutal match that lasted for well over an hour. Yet, they smiled nearly the entire time and Neji had been the first to congratulate him on his victory.

When had he started crying?

"Yo." Ichigo hesitantly walked up behind him. "I'm sorry for bothering you, Lee-san, but your friend is awake."

"It is alright, Ichigo-kun." Lee kept his back to the Substitute. "I will catch up in a moment. Thank you for coming to get me."

"Don't mention it."

Ichigo disappeared and Lee dried his tears.

Do not worry, Gai-sensei. I am certain you are okay - that all of you are okay.

"Back again so soon, Naruto?"

The demon fox sat nonchalantly within a cage. Kyo reclined on its roof, staring up at the sky as colorful ethereal waves flowed amidst the midnight black. Naruto stopped short of the bars and crossed his arms over his chest. His last scuffle with the fox, while Kyo took over his body, had made it painfully clear taming the beast might be a real impossibility. In his original body, that wouldn't have posed a threat. He would have been able to ignore the fox, and by not actively drawing on it, the beast would remain trapped. In a vessel that couldn't form a lasting seal however…

"Do you see something you like? Don't tell me you've developed a fancy for orange fur and tails."

"You've been hanging out with Kyo too much."

"I agree. Let's kill him so things can go back to the way they used to." Kyubi waved his clawed hand around. "You get in over your head. I give you power. You win. I get a step closer to consuming you. You know, the good old days."

"How about you just give me your energy like a good pet and save everyone a lot of headaches?"

Fearsome claws smashed into the bars, inches away from Naruto's unflinching face.

"I am no pet, boy! Do not think I am the spiritless mass of chakra you once tamed in the belly of the Shinigami, and do not be so arrogant as to believe my defeat at your hands is valid." The fox retracted his claws and roared so loud the mind space rumbled. "I am Kyubi, King of all Biju! What you fought against was nothing more than an emaciated corpse under the control of a fool. Never mistake my generosity, my hatred for Madara, as an act of submission to you."

The Nine-tails punctuated his remarks with a growl and his glare bore down on the blonde. Naruto ran a calming hand through his hair.

"You're right, sorry." Naruto frowned and met the foxes gaze with a weary one of his own. "What are we going to do fox? Without your strength, I can't beat the Earl. Maybe, I can't anyway, but at least nine tails of energy gives me some kind of chance. But you're not going to give it up, and unlike before, I can't draw on it without your cooperation."

"I said I would give you power."

"Without possessing me?"

"When did you start looking only at the negative?"

Naruto frowned and closed his eyes. Under Madara's control, a Rasenshuriken had been enough to defeat the fox. He had utilized

two larger, more powerful, variants in training. They should be enough, especially if he struck while Kyo bound him. It felt cowardly, but desperation trumped pride. Kyo's Mizuchi was the weakest of the samurai's attacks, but like the Earl said, his companion spirit had nothing capable of killing the bastard. Considering his Rasenshuriken only damaged the shadow guy the Earl decapitated, whatever attack he threw wouldn't have enough oomph behind it without the demonic energy.

"You don't even banter anymore. Have we really become that estranged? It's so disheartening."

"Kyo, how long are you going to be able to cage him since you can't force him back behind the barrier now?"

"Less time than you have."

"So whatever I'm going to do, it needs to be soon."

"Yep."

"I always feel so left out when you two are conversing."

The mindscape faded away as Naruto opened his eyes.

"I'd worried you'd gone comatose." Hinata handed him a box of rations.

"I had a chat with Kyubi. He was difficult as always." Naruto's searched the small room lit by the fire in its center. "Where's Shino?"

"This time you remember me, Naruto? This make me happy." Shino walked in through the slanted doorway wearing his familiar clothes. "I needed to replace my previous attire so I went home briefly."

"Alone?"

"I was with him to be safe." Ichigo came up behind the bug-user. "Nothing's out there anyway." The teen winced as everyone's face

fell. "Sorry, bad choice of words."

"Do not be disheartened my friend." Lee slapped him on the back as he walked in. "We know your spirit is full of kindness."

"This is a rather odd occurrence. How do I know this? Because, you are all dead."

"That's a long story and I think all of us need rest after the day we've had." Naruto forced a smile and snapped apart a pair of chopsticks. "Let's eat and we can start catching up tomorrow."

"A wise decision. My colonies become unruly if I do not remain well rested."

"I do have one question." Hinata's voice came out strong, but carried a subtle hint of hesitation. "We saw the teleportation seal. Where was the receiving point?"

Shino shifted uncomfortably under his coat, hiding his face further under the high collar.

"There is a large chance the seal failed and that gray man succeeded in wiping out the entire population. However, if it did work, they headed for Amegakure."

"Yosh, we can make that journey in two days at full speed!" Lee leapt to his feet and gave an exuberant nice guy pose. "Do not be despondent, my friends. My heart tells me everyone is safe. I stake my life on it."

Aizen sat at the head of the table and sipped at his tea as the last of his remaining Espada took their seats. The empty chairs for his fifth, sixth, and ninth warriors added a small degree of tension to the assembly. While the roster certainly changed from time to time as stronger additions forced out the weaker, the number remained consistent. To have less, and not due to planned absence, triggered

within them a subconscious sense of vulnerability. They could be defeated by outsiders - the same outsiders who would soon become their opponents.

He had intended to replace the missing numbers immediately upon his return from Seireitei. However, the reveal of the Ark and the increased production of his common foot soldiers demanded the majority of his attention. And in truth, the newer Arrancar could not compete, neither in terms of unique abilities or power.

"I am grateful all of you are here. I apologize it has been so long since our last meal together."

"You've been busy, building up such an army." An old stocky Arrancar with a bone crown atop his head gulped down a mouthful of wine from a crude goblet. "Reminds me of mine, before you became the Boss."

"In spite of your grand powers, we lacked the numbers to fully enact our revised plan."

"Revised?"

"Currently, pre-selected hollow are invading another world under the direction of our friend, the Earl. The inhabitants of that world are far stronger than normal humans so their… nutritional value is rapidly increasing the feeding beasts. Yammy, you dealt with them first hand. How do these ninja fair?"

"They're trash." The giant scratched at the faint white scars on his chest. "They buzz and bite like insects."

"Compared to an Espada, I have no doubt. But to a regular hollow, well, you can see they managed to irritate Yammy's Hierro." Aizen sipped again as the other Arrancar cast curious glances over at the giant. "The chosen hollow have already returned and are undergoing evolution into Menos. We have left the path open and baited more hollow to continue plaguing these ninja."

"Such fascinating human specimens, combining physical power with reiryoku." An eccentric man with pink hair slinked back in his chair as he fiddled with his glasses. "I would love to gain permission to go and gather a sampling."

"In time, Szayelaporro Granz. For this excursion, I have already chosen a team to assist the Earl in obtaining the final instrument of our war machine."

"A team?" The crowned Arrancar snorted. "Send me and my Fraccion to lay waste to them."

"I believed you would appreciate leading this new army in the human world, Baraggan." Aizen smirked as the aged Arrancar tilted his chin up in scrutiny. "You being the former king of Hueco Mundo."

"With the Earl as powerful as he is and the other-worlders scrambling, sending a team seems like a lot of unneeded effort." A tall man with unruly brown hair yawned. "Just let the regular hollow handle it."

"The same ninja who ultimately repelled our invasion on Seireitei surmounted the trap in Hell laid out by the Earl. We must also take into account they likely sought assistance from Kisuke Urahara to devise a method that would allow the ninja world a chance to fight back." Aizen set his cup down. "This last item is too important for underestimation to be allowed."

"Where would you have us, Aizen-sama?" A dark skinned blonde woman asked from behind the high color of her half shirt.

"Tier Harribel, you shall go with your Fraccion to directly engage Ichigo Kurosaki and his companions. The Earl reports they are likely headed for a particular village. Yammy Llargo and Zommari Rureaux, you shall be part of a mass attack on the city housing; the necessary piece of the altar. The Exequias shall be accompanying you. Ulquiorra, you shall locate the Earl and assist him as needed."

"You mentioned an army?"

"Of course, Baraggan. Once the army is completed, you will be given a regiment to invade Karakura Town."

"How big will this regiment be?"

Aizen's smirk deepened.

"Its shadow will be tall enough to blanket the city in darkness." Aizen stood and made for the door. "The rest of you are to remain in Los Noches until further notice."

He steadily walked the steps higher into the fortress until he reached his favorite balcony overlooking the vast desert of Hueco Mundo, its bleached sands shining under the moon. Perhaps, he'd explained too much to them. Betrayal came easily to a few of his Espada, and if they knew the fate awaiting them, it would surely lead to a revolt. Such a thing posed no real danger to him, but using them to further his plans was more efficient. By bringing them into the fold and revealing his plans, or a part of his plans, it led them to believe he bestowed them with trust. They would obey better and fight harder. With any luck, many of them would not return.

After all, none of them would be on the Ark when the time came.

"Ya plottin' somethin' again, Aizen-taicho?"

"Gin. How is your arm?"

The pale haired traitor silently came out of the doorway's shadow with his normal serpentine grin.

"Back to one hundred percent." Gin came up and stood beside him. "You have any room for me in these little plans of yours?"

"Gin, you are my most trusted subordinate. As a reward for your loyalty and to express my gratitude, you are welcome to participate in whatever manner you wish." Aizen leaned on the banister. "I know

you care for Rangiku Matsumoto. If you wish to seek her out when the final battles begin, you have my blessing."

"Battles? Not just one?"

"Baraggan will lay waste to Karakura Town, forcing the Shinigami to send forces to protect it. However, concurrently, these ninja-fed Arrancar will be launching simultaneous attacks on both Seireitei and Rukongai. With Ichigo Kurosaki and his friends otherwise engaged in the ninja world, the Gotei 13, still reeling from our first assault, will be stretched too thin to interfere with what is occurring at the Ark."

"My, I'm not used to ya talkin' so freely about your plots."

"The Shinigami must engage each battlefront or the destruction to the balance of souls between human world and Soul Society would be guaranteed. We measured their strength against the prototype dark matter infused Arrancar. They cannot hope to defend against this more powerful generation, which is already three times the size of the previous."

"Scary."

"Only for our adversaries." Aizen tilted his head back at the cloudless sky filled with billions of stars. "By the time everyone finishes fighting, even if the unlikely occurs and they discover the Ark, we will be safe within it and the altar will be activated, elevating me to godhood."

Grim - it was a word he never fathomed could describe a meeting among the captains of the Gotei 13. Rarely tense, often eager, always confident, the assembled force produced the greatest strength in Soul Society. Each iteration dealt with conflicts assuredly. The idea of defeat or failure had no place in such an assembly.

Yet, as the final recounting of Aizen's multi-front plot left his lips, Yamamoto saw how gravely the captains and temporary division leaders were handling the information. Everyone sported a defiant

and determined expression to fight against the threat. However, the bloodthirsty excitement of Zaraki or the unrestrained glee of Mayuri had been replaced with a quiet conviction.

The grim reality had made a potent and decisive arrival.

"I understand things are dire. There are moments in history - in life - that test resolve or appear insurmountable. I stand here and see your conviction. I feel your will to fight until the breath is robbed from your bodies. I realize the weight of this upcoming war makes your shoulders heavy and legs tired, but you continue to stand tall and unfazed. Such is your pride as captains and leaders of the Gotei 13." Yamamoto struck his cane against the ground, puncturing the marble tile. "We were founded in hopelessness and found victory. We persevered through conflicts and remained whole. So now, I say to you gathered, this peril will be crushed beneath our combined might. To exterminate great evil, this is why the Gotei 13 exists!"

Gaara walked out of the meeting and immediately headed for the training grounds. He'd already planned to work around the clock and instructed all interested in forming teams they would be doing the same. It would remain that way until they grasped basic combinations. Then, they would ease into a regular cycle of resting and training. Maybe, it was futile. Aizen could be launching his attack in days rather than weeks. He had to try though. If it only saved a handful more lives, it would be worth it.

"Gaara-taicho!" Rangiku bounded down the stairs and quickly fell in step with him. "Want to grab dinner and a drink? I'll even treat this time."

"I need as much time as possible to craft working teams."

"Want any help?"

"Unfortunately, this is something only I can do." He allowed a genuine smile to tug at his lips. "I really do appreciate the offer."

"I understand, guess I want to be around people right now. The tension hanging over everything just became a lot worse with the meeting."

"Yes. It definitely dredged up memories of those moments prior to Suna's destruction. It's best not to focus on it, because ultimately, we defeated Danzo and his army. And ultimately, the same will happen here."

"I believe you, but what gives you that confidence?"

"Aizen would not be splitting the war across three fronts unless he feared the combined might of the Gotei 13. And while it does spread us thin, the same could be said for his army. That says nothing of the influence Naruto and the others will have on the outcome. As became a popular saying within Konoha, Naruto is the number one most unpredictable ninja in the world."

She laughed lightly and inched a little closer to him.

"I'm glad you two worked things out. Is he going to be okay? I only saw him at that one meeting, and he didn't seem interested in fighting."

Gaara stopped and fully faced her as she did the same. A wistful, almost sad, smile played on his features as he stared directly into her sapphire eyes.

"When you're afraid of losing someone you deeply care for, it is almost impossible not to make the rest of the world take a back seat."

Her eyes widened as a slight blush crept up on her cheeks. She looked down as a few strands of hair fell over her shoulders.

"You won't lose me, Gaara." Her voice barely came over a whisper and would have been lost in a gentle wind. "I know you worry about, Gin - my history with him. I do want to know why he betrayed us. I

want to ask him why he's done what he's done. That doesn't mean you have to hold back if you don't want to. You don't have to be afraid of me."

When he claimed his Zanpakuto, the Commander himself sent him to be trained under her. He'd surpassed her within the first month, but they continued training together. Vibrant, innocently selfish, unintentionally funny, he cherished being around her. Sparring sessions stretched into talks or visiting shops. Her life, from when Gin saved it as children, to becoming a Shinigami and finding the boy who would become her captain in the Rukongai slums, it all fascinated him. She likewise, constantly wanted to learn about his past.

And then, Aizen's conspiracy finally came to light.

Yamamoto was done having him hide as the lowest rank in the First Division and immediately made him captain of the Ninth. All of a sudden, his responsibilities tripled and having time to get away became near impossible.

No, that wasn't completely truthful. What really happened is Gin left as a co-conspirator and he did not want to take advantage of the traitor's absence. Rangiku was a strong woman and did genuinely care for both of them. But, Gaara had intentionally kept some distance between Rangiku and himself as a courtesy. He saw how Gin checked up on her. How the former captain would step in on sparring matches to test him. He saw the history between them.

Maybe it wasn't love between Rangiku and Gin. Maybe it was. At a minimum, it was a powerful bond that Gaara respected. The betrayal still hadn't completely severed that bond, and while he fully understood the implication in Rangiku's words, he was unwilling to accept them for now.

I believe Kankuro referred to my hesitance with women as trust issues.

"I need to get going, Rangiku." He tentatively leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Please, be patient with me."

He straightened up and waited for her to nod with a smile. Taking off in a cloud of sand, he soared over the dividing walls and landed softly behind the gathered crowd. Aside from the Eleventh and Fourth, representatives from each division chatted idly by torchlight.

"Break into your three man teams. We have a lot of training ahead of us."

Rangiku sat quietly at her desk in the Tenth Division and downed another small cup of sake. All of her drinking buddies were either gone or too busy. Completely understandable given the circumstances, and unlike her, they didn't have Gaara helping lead their division

The man was scarily efficient.

"And equally aloof." She mumbled and poured another drink. "Oh, Rangiku, what a sad, sad place you've put yourself in, drinking by yourself."

She downed it in a gulp and let out a gasp as it burned its way down her throat.

It really was pathetic, feeling as lonely as she did. Sure, Hisagi and her young captain were gone on orders and Gaara was off being a leader in that cool, deadpanned, nurturing, wonderful way of his. She got that their responsibilities came first. Hers did too, when she couldn't sneak them on to her captain.

She stifled a tipsy giggle and readied another cup.

"If he saw me right now, he'd lecture me so much. Matsumoto! Don't drink all over the paperwork. Have some decorum as a vice-captain. What am I going to do with you?" She started laughing too hard to

continue. Resting her head on the cup holding arm, she tipped the sake bottle around with her fingertips. "All my closest people away from me. It really sucks being alone."

She sat up and drank the cup a little slower.

She'd hated it as a kid. She'd hated it whenever Gin would disappear. The cold lump that sat at the top of her stomach was one of the worst feelings in the world.

She never knew whether she was born in Soul Society or died in the human world as an infant. Her earliest memories were as a child, probably four or five, wandering around the cold outer regions of Rukongai. Always cold, always hungry, and always alone, days and months passed by in a haze of those feelings. It remained that way for so long, until the day Gin found her passed out on the ground, her body finally giving out because the spiritual energy in her soul had developed to a point it needed food to be replenished.

He saved her that day. He stayed with her after that day. He gave her a birthday. He guided her to the Academy. He always made sure she was alright even as their lives as Shinigami took them down separate paths.

He said he would change things, making things end without her crying.

"I haven't cried over you yet, Gin."

She'd gotten used to his long absences over the years. In the academy, she met Hisagi and they became fast friends over their mutual love for partying. She met her captain and cherished him like a younger, albeit more responsible, brother. With them, she never needed to be alone. It's why she often napped in the office, because Hitsugaya would be working at his desk diligently when she woke up.

She had found people to be close to that were always a short walk away.

And then Gaara, the stoic, handsome, kind, and clueless newcomer came out of nowhere and knocked the wind from her lungs - quite literally given their first sparring match.

"I may not have ever figured out what my feelings for Gin were, but damn, I didn't have any question about him." She went to pour again and a few drips came out. "Already?"

After a few harsh shakes, she gave it a withering glare and tossed it over her shoulder to join the other three. Reaching down by her feet, she grabbed a fresh bottle.

"So cup-san am I drinking because I'm bored, alone, confused… bored? Or is it because of two guys?" She set the cup down and struggled with the top. "Is there really even any conflict?"

Gin was her first and dearest friend. He cared about her, and since it was Gin, she belonged to an impossibly short list. A part of her loved him, or did love him. Things had changed even before he sided with a man bent on ending existence so he could become a god. She'd become tired of being abandoned by him without warning, and as events would justify, it always felt like he was playing with her. Whether that love was platonic or not, she couldn't tell.

Gaara though, he was honest and straightforward in everything but his fighting style. Compassionate in his own way and also familiar with loneliness, he complemented her personality and history so well she often wondered if they were made for each other. She'd fallen for him by the first year.

Gin knew it and he pressured Gaara, but honestly, it never felt like petty jealousy. If anything, it felt like he was testing the sand-user, making sure he was worthy.

"I think I've drunk so much. Thinking's not doing good." She shot to her feet and swayed from side to side. "I'm gonna go kiss Gaara's tattoo!"

She stumbled around the chair, slipped on a discarded bottle, and collapsed onto the couch.

"May-be, I take a sleep."

The sun gradually began to sink into the horizon. The children raced around on lush green grass, jumping from rock to rock across a gentle stream only to fall in a squeal of delight. They splashed at each other as little monkeys pointed and laughed. It was good to see them enjoying themselves. They'd spent the day training and now they needed to have a chance to be goofy. The monkeys had helped trigger the laughter and the local kids made sure to keep the smiles going.

It might make the nightmares a little more bearable for them tonight.

Konohamaru adjusted his headband and summoned an older monkey to help round up the little ones. It was good for them to interact with kids for both the exercise and to have them form bonds with those they would someday protect. It may be foolish, but he still felt there would be a someday. Hanabi-chan called it the unyielding will he inherited from his friend and idol. His fellow ninja called it the trait of a leader.

"Alright, kids. Your parents are coming so its time to go in for the night and get something to eat. We'll start training again early tomorrow."

They largely ignored him and continued horsing around. He sighed with a smile and looked over at his girlfriend. Something had gotten her to laugh with the children. It was a rare feat, since usually it entailed some misfortune befalling him for her to laugh aloud. She'd certainly come a long way from being the ice queen from their genin days, but she still acted serious in public - kind, but serious.

He caught himself from letting his eyes roam over her. He'd learned his lesson the first time Hiashi caught him in an 'improper' act. He

hadn't felt his balls for a week. Hanabi laughed for two. Thankfully, her father actually liked him and encouraged the relationship as long as it remained 'within the boundaries of pre-marital interactions.'

Otherwise, the damage would have been permanent.

He rubbed the fatigue from his eyes as the parents came and started retrieving their kids. It'd been almost forty-eight hours since, by some miracle, the Yondaime warped the entire village to Ame an instant before that purple death ball sent them to the afterlife.

Exhausted, they'd landed in this very training field and collapsed on the spot. Ame-nin immediately went to work gathering the wounded and ushering the tired to designated apartments so they could clean up and rest. It was weird, being in a village once extremely isolated and home to the Akatsuki, but being treated with complete hospitality.

I guess everyone finally had enough of hating each other for the past.

He knew they still revered the Amekage as a kind of god, which certainly made it easier for the man once known as Pain to tell them they were going to forgive and try to move forward. He was smart about it too. By stopping the rain, expanding both land and lake for agriculture and leisure, and renovating the city into a less somber architecture, the citizens of Amegakure gained the greatest benefit of Nagato's new peaceful goals.

Of course, the other villages understanding their wars birthed the Akatsuki and taking steps to help Ame improve the quality of its city helped as well.

"Hey." Hanabi shoved him with her forearm. "You actually going to get some sleep tonight?"

"Don't know."

"Are you going to try?" Anyone else would have missed the concern in her passive voice. "You need to be fully rested at all times."

"I'll try. I promise."

"Good."

She quickly activated her eyes and snuggled up against his arm.

"It really isn't a big deal if people see you and I cuddling, even your dad doesn't mind."

"I find it awkward for other people to see me like this. Just be quiet and enjoy it."

Silence fell between them as parents dried off their kids and new parents arrived.

He allowed himself to relax into the contact. How weird was that? He hadn't even realized he was tense. He should probably find Anko and see if she'd found a bar yet. He'd been running on fumes and needed something to let the exhaustion win out over his nerves.

He hated the taste of the stuff, and given his preferred fighting style, despised anything that compromised his sense of balance. Still, the long days preparing for the inevitable left his nerves shot. The attack had been brutal and drained the last bit of strength out of everyone in just ten hours, something even the Kyubi rampage never accomplished.

Now, every time he closed his eyes, it made him break out into a cold sweat. He'd focused on the kids. They made him laugh and he excelled at distracting them. He didn't want them anxious or scared with the adults so uneasy. The Ame and civilian kids were easy. The academy students were a lot harder. After all, they witnessed the same crap he did. They were pinned down behind the cage behind him, seeing invisible monsters rip people apart and buildings taking damage for no seeable reason.

They honestly handled that like true ninja. Instead of breaking into tears every time a can got knocked over or a tree creaked, they dove deeper into training or playing. Their screaming still echoed across the city at night as nightmarish memories came for them, but at least during waking hours, they could forget a little bit if kept busy enough.

They could cry away the bad dreams when there weren't going to be anymore.

"No way in Hell." Hanabi pulled away from him and ran to the edge of the grassy platform that extended out over the lake that surrounded Amegakure. "Konohamaru, come see this."

He jogged over and squinted out across the horizon reflected in the water below. They started as shadows, walking away from the backdrop of the setting sun. His heart rate quickened as they became more defined and passed through the invisible barrier Nagato had around the city, shielding them from the monsters. A lump formed in his throat as his eyes watered and damp streaks glistened off Hanabi's cheeks.

They approached the city at a calm gait, standing tall despite the rips and grime adorning their clothes. Their dirt smudged faces became clear and his mouth fell open in a shaky smile as a disbelieving laugh struggled to take form.

The alarm went off, letting the city know newcomers stood outside its walls. But for him, it meant something entirely different. It was an announcement of hope in the face of all the bleak garbage trying to bury them. It was the fulfillment of a promise in the prophesy read to them.

It was telling the world its heroes - its saviors had returned.

Author's Notes:

This chapter was a little shorter than I planned for. However, I really wanted to end on that scene/line. It's still just shy of 20 pages.

I'd considered including some parts with the main group's journey, but given they would be discussing information the reader already knew, the section came across as repetitive filler. So, I skipped forward the two days to keep things moving briskly. It served its purpose in providing the necessary lull to close out this arc and set up the next one.

It was nice to see viewership bumped up a little with the last chapter. Hopefully, this story will have long legs like Asunder (which still pulls in quite a bit of traffic despite its age). I don't think Rend will ever come close to reaching the first story's numbers, but honestly, I knew a crossover story carried that risk and have accepted it.

Regardless, I am very grateful for those who stuck with me through the infrequent updates/hiatuses, and I have enjoyed talking with those of you who have reached out with questions/comments about Rend. I really am striving to right something that will be a huge payoff for your support and patience

See you next week.

Drowning

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 19

Shino knocked on the door to his family's temporary apartment. Finding them had been a simple matter using his Kikaichu, freeing up Konohamaru and Hanabi to guide the others to their destinations. The journey to Ame went surprisingly smooth, given the frequent attacks by what his friends called hollows. He had to admit, being able to see and engage them brought a degree of satisfaction.

It almost garnered a smile the first time he punched one into the ground.

Naruto's decision to travel at a normal pace hadn't been a popular one, but Shino appreciated it. By not focusing solely on their destination, they could survey how the rest of the world faired. It allowed them to properly explain the state of the spirit world, and perhaps even more so, it provided them time to recover.

They also had many questions about what transpired over the seven years. Finding an adequate balance to convey the village's sorrow at their loss with the peace and happiness their sacrifice provided had been… challenging. The only item that they remained silent on were Naruto's parents. The resurrected blonde did not ask.

Shino did not offer.

The door opened slowly, revealing a shock of purple hair amid the crack. A brown eye looked up over the rim of sunglasses and the door hurriedly opened. Shingo, his son, quietly stepped into the hall and buried his head against Shino's legs as he hugged them.

Shino placed a comforting hand on his son's head as the little shoulders began to shake from silent crying. Shingo always tried to emulate him and the rest of the clan. To hide his feelings, he hadn't quite grasped that it was okay to do so in the safety of his home, surrounded by family. It was not unlike what his father had chastised himself for the same thing seven years ago in the aftermath of the battle with that monster.

Do not apologize for what you are feeling. This is good you have those you care for.

"I'm sorry, father." Shingo tried to stifle his sobs. "I know crying is a weakness."

"Only in front of your enemies." Shino scooped him up and held him to eye level. "We are not enemies are we?"

"No, father."

"Then, do not feel weak. I am happy to see you safe as well."

"Shouldn't you report in to Hokage-sama or have you already?" Yugao emerged from her hiding spot against the wall and sheathed her sword. "He would be relieved that you are alive; as I am."

"Konohamaru is taking Naruto Uzumaki to meet with him." He set Shingo down as he walked inside, ignoring her quizzical look as she shut the door behind him. "I was under the impression our hosts have been very inviting. Your actions say otherwise."

"It's an old habit from being on Hokage protective detail when visiting a foreign village." She rested the blade against the wall and led him to the kitchen. "They have been very kind. I'm simply distrusting."

"How did you make it out, father?"

"And why did you say Naruto Uzumaki?"

"Succinctly, he has returned to our world like these creatures have, as have Rock Lee and Hinata Hyuga."

"The great heroes?" Shingo's voice carried a barely restrained awe. "Did they rescue you?"

"Yes and they've come to help."

"It must be exciting, having them back." Yugao started pulling food out of the cupboards. "I know you have a lot of complex feelings about not going to Madara's tower."

Shino shifted under his coat.

"My injuries would have prevented me from engaging anyone and could have risked me becoming a hindrance. Staying behind was the correct choice. Any doubts were derived purely from guilt and fed the human need to feel at ease by claiming to have done something."

"If I didn't know you better, I would say it influenced you to stay behind at the village. You're lucky you have such an understanding wife."

"I am indeed fortunate." He came up behind her and rested his nose on top of her head, finding comfort in her scent. "And so very grateful I can be standing here with both of you."

Naruto ascended the never-ending stairs of Pain's spire. Apparently, it allowed the once self-proclaimed god to broadcast his energy over the entire city, barricading it from the hollows and ensuring the privacy of his war council.

I think it just leaves attacking ninja exhausted by the time they get to the top.

Konohamaru continued to chatter incessantly about the last seven years. When he'd asked what happened to him and the others from

Soul Society, the conversation had quickly shifted back to Konoha. There wasn't much for him to say other than; I slept for all but the past month. Sure, there was the entire world ending thing, but the Hokage needed to hear it first. Shino knowing didn't really count.

I still can't believe the lazy bum did it.

It hadn't left a lot of room for talking about himself. Ichigo could have been a good topic, but Konohamaru got pretty quiet at the mention of him taking on a protégé. So the conversation had remained centered on Konohamaru's exploits instead. It made him proud, knowing the kid he taught some of his techniques to was becoming a legend in his own right.

And yes, he laughed his ass off when his young rival told him about how Hiashi temporarily castrated him.

A big part of him was glad everyone recovered and were doing well. Shino having a kid, hell, most of them having kids, it made him sad he missed out on it. However, it also comforted him. It felt good to have proof defeating Madara had a lasting impact. If life had been miserable or full of more wars, he wouldn't be able to handle that.

"Hokage-sama has been working around the clock with the Yondaime and the Amekage to figure something out." Konohamaru bounded over the last flight of steps. "You guys being back is going to change everything."

I don't' know if we're back or visiting, Konohamaru.

It was a topic they'd briefly gone over back in Seireitei. Was home an option, did they just stay? They had physical bodies. Well, their gigais passed for physical bodies. Their current variant was still a shell. It allowed them to still fight at full capacity like Urahara's and interact in the living world, but it was only a shell. They wouldn't age. They wouldn't be human.

Rukia had said other types could correct that, binding their soul to the gigai until they became nearly human, chakra, sniffles, and all. The idea of being back after everything - it both terrified and tempted them. Would they be happy with the inevitable changes that came from a seven years absence? Did they want to go back to being active ninja, dying as the needs of the village demanded it?

Would the Shinigami even allow them to?

The old bastard had the science division working around the clock to calculate the risks and benefits of leaving the gate between worlds open or closing it. Would spirits now flow into Soul Society or continue normally into the true afterlife?

It was a giant pile of questions and worries.

At the top of it were his parents. He was moments away from seeing the Yondaime, which meant his mother wouldn't be far behind. Seeing them again honestly scared him. He'd made the effort to call them mom and dad purely as a kindness. Would they recognize that or instead believe everything was okay? They'd want to reach out either way.

Another thing to mix into the rest of the pile.

"Hey, Naruto. We're here so stop spacing out." Konohamaru stopped in front of a large set of double doors and motioned for Naruto to head inside. "Come find me when you're done if you get a chance."

"Yeah." Naruto kept his head up and sucked in a breath, forcing his insecurities aside. He forced a grin over his trepidation and kicked the door open. "Naruto Uzumaki, reporting for action!"

Shikamaru whipped his head around and froze, the others in the room following suit. He kept the grin plastered on as he scanned the room. Pain was hooked up to a bunch of tubes in his chair, the life visibly draining from him. He seemed unsurprised by his arrival. The

Yondaime's face struggled to keep pain from his face, but the light tremor in his left hand gave it away.

"Is this what my predecessors had to deal with on a daily basis." Shikamaru pinched the bridge of his nose. "Now I get why the Godaime sent you away for three years."

"You don't really seem surprised to see me."

"I had a number of reasons to suspect you'd show up. Plus, the Amekage recognized you when you entered his barrier."

"Amekage?" Naruto quirked an eyebrow.

"Nagato." Shikamaru pointed at the man seated in the chair. "Things have changed a little since you-"

"Hell yeah they have!" Naruto moved a little closer as his grin shifted into a slyer smirk. "What's this I hear about you knocking up Gaara's sister?"

"She's my wife, Naruto."

"And Gaara will kill you regardless. I just didn't think you could put out the kind of effort to… provide notes for Ero-sensei."

"You should have a little more decorum." Shikamaru barely suppressed his laughter. "I'm Hokage now."

"And I'm literally a ghost possessing a meat suit. Things are too damn weird for formalities, Shikamaru." Naruto chuckled and removed a few scrolls from their holsters. "Here, something to turn this situation around."

He tossed them onto the table.

"What are they?" Minato picked one up. "Inside the scroll I mean.

"A gift from the guys on the other side. They'll convert your chakra into pure reiryoku, which is basically a fighting form of spiritual energy. If the results are the same as with Shino, you'll be able to see the hollows clearly and take them out."

"We were surprised when the Amekage said it was him. Konoha wasn't in a good place when we escaped and he stayed behind."

"We got to him just in time." Naruto looked over at Nagato. "How does your barrier work against hollows?"

"The Rinnegan allows me to see both planes of existence." The former missin-nin's voice sounded stronger than his tired body let on. "I can modify my chakra into a purely spiritual component. It also helps I have some dominion over souls."

The way he said that made the hair go up on the back of his neck. It wasn't like it came across as menacing. Rather, it alluded to something that Naruto wasn't sure if he wanted to know the answer to.

"What do you mean dominion over souls?"

"I can remove the soul from a person's body." The ringed purple eyes bore into Naruto's. "Or, I can return the soul to a body, essentially bringing the person back to life."

Bingo.

"Why didn't you revive us then?"

"The technique costs the caster his life in exchange. While we had a common enemy in Madara, we were not allies, Naruto Uzumaki. Besides, while the technique does heal the physical body to a degree, there must be a body. After your technique and my crushing the tower so it did not rebuild, there wasn't enough of you left."

Naruto bit his lip. The man was right on every front. And honestly, they would have been useless against the hollow if they'd been made aliv- more alive. It burned, but he needed to stay on point.

"Getting back on topic." Naruto turned back to Shikamaru. "What do you have for a plan?"

"Until ten seconds ago, we'd planned on slowly evacuating the other ninja villages. They didn't get hit anywhere near as hard as Konoha, but they were still trapped behind seal barriers replicating Nagato's. They aren't permanent and are likely weakening."

"I was going to begin mass teleportation, now that we've worked out the kinks." Minato's embarrassed smile had a tightness to it, like the uncomfortable atmosphere made smiling hurt. "We were trying to figure out how long the seals would last and the fastest way to bring them here, the only truly safe spot."

"Until Pain's chakra reserves give out." Naruto folded his arms over his chest. "Then, you guys are sitting ducks."

"I've structured my output so that I can recover enough that will not become an issue."

"Does the barrier cost more when a hollow tries to break through."

"It's negligible."

"That won't be the case with the Earl or some of the threats working with him."

"The Earl?"

"He's that one creature isn't he?" Shikamaru frowned and leaned against the table. "Fat, gray skin, impossibly toothy grin, talks like he's punctuating his sentences with a heart."

"That's him." Naruto nodded and gave a grim look. "Let Hinata, Lee, and me handle him when he shows. You guys focus on eliminating

the swarm of hollows that will probably come with him."

"You said this should let us fight on equal footing." Minato set the scroll down. "This doesn't have to be like last time. Maybe we can help-"

"He's stronger than Madara." Naruto kept his voice neutral despite the nerves he felt as everyone's face paled. "He almost killed Hinata once already. Nothing I throw at him does much damage, if any. Even with Lee using all eight gates, the three of us together may not be enough to beat him. All you would do is end up being a casualty."

It didn't sound angry, at least, Naruto hoped so. As much as he wasn't going to let the Yondaime use this as some form of atonement, the reality was that this scenario mirrored the one with Madara perfectly. The opponent outclassed them and only his team stood a chance.

Hopefully, this time they'd have a happier ending.

"Well, I'm ready to get something to eat and take a nap." Shikamaru faked a yawn and stretched. "I'm sure a lot of people want to catch up with you. We'll start fresh in the morning and include the new option of fighting back."

"Sounds like a plan."

Naruto spun around and headed for the door. It opened inward as he reached for the handle and his insides instantly twisted into knots.

Kushina peeked her head in as two kids peeked around either side of her legs. Instantly, he knew exactly who they were.

Looks like they didn't take any time moving on.

A million words roiled in his snagging throat, some angry, some sad, some understanding or even curious. Ultimately, they were simple words that had no purpose.

He grinned at them first, then her. Giving a friendly nod, he pushed open the other door and walked out.

"Narut-"

His Shunshin carried him out of the nearby window and into the sky.

"Gai-sensei!"

"Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

"Lee!"

It'd been touching in the beginning. They'd embraced in tears of joy like long lost father and son. Lee had rapidly babbled at his teacher all about Soul Society. He regaled his mentor with the battles in Madara's tower up to the present. He proclaimed his love for Karin. It had been touching.

That was over an hour ago.

"Lee-san, could you please rejoice more quietly?" Hinata asked firmly and burgeoning killing intent swirled around her sister. "Ichigo's training needs to begin."

"She's right, Lee. Come, let us find your original teammates for a grand reunion." Gai flipped onto his hands. "We shall use this opportunity to train together like before."

"Yes, Gai-sensei!"

Lee mimicked the action and they took off in a cloud of dust, racing on their hands. Ichigo scratched the back of his head and stuck out his bottom lip as Hanabi grumbled. Kurenai coughed into her fist to regain their attention.

"As I mentioned previously, genjutsu and hypnosis are similar in results and very different in execution."

"I'm guessing that means it takes a different method to break out of it."

"Precisely, Ichigo. Genjutsu can be broken with pain, unique traits, or a sudden spike of chakra to disrupt the altered flow caused by the genjutsu. Hypnosis doesn't rely on outward manipulation or stimulus. Instead, it forces the mind to create the illusion itself, and thus, making it exceptionally real. Hypnosis usually takes time and is extremely difficult to instill completely. Even using genjutsu, or having something like the Sharingan, creating long lasting deception to a near absolute level takes years of subtle effort."

"And Aizen can do it by just waving his katana around." Ichigo rubbed the fatigue from his eyes. "So how do I beat it?"

Kurenai, visibly satisfied by his answer, stepped back into the shadows of the tree line.

"The first step will be learning to identify you are under an illusion. I don't know what Hinata told you about my training, but if time is of the essence, I am a brutal taskmaster. We will start with a challenging genjutsu and get progressively harder from there." Kurenai made hand seals for the dog, snake, monkey, ox, and tiger. "Magen: Jubaku Satsu."

Shikamaru peeled off his shoes and collapsed onto the floor. The sliver of the young moon outlined everything in barely discernable silver. Yeah, he wasn't moving one step further. Between planning the evacuation, the escape, settling, and planning the next move, he'd been working on fumes for almost a month and had gone without sleep almost entirely for three days.

"I was wondering if you'd actually make it back one of these nights." Temari appeared over him with her jaw slightly jut out to the side.

"The bed is literally sixteen steps further."

"I'm comfortable here."

"Do you want anything to eat?"

"Wasn't it my turn to cook tonight?"

"It's been your turn for three weeks." He could easily see her wicked grin in the dark. "You can make it up by getting up with the baby for a month straight."

"Troublesome."

She sat down next to him.

"There's a lot of talk spreading around the city."

"Yes, Naruto is alive. So are Shino, Hinata, and Lee. During my brief conversation with our continuingly unpredictable blonde, he off handedly stated Gaara would kill me once he knew I got you pregnant."

"Funny." She leaned in with a smirk so her face hovered a few inches away from his. "I thought I initiated it."

It still amazed him how her forceful nature had matured into such feminine charm. She'd always taken the lead. He was always more than happy to let her. Somewhere down the line, it shifted from gruff and bluntly demanding to more cunning and humorous. Of course, she still reverted to the former when it came down to business. But, when it was just them, he got to see a more playful side that was still uniquely Temari in its forcefulness. It compelled him to brush his feigned reluctance aside - normally that was.

As much as he wanted to, he genuinely was too beat to take the bait this time.

"You seem a lot more at ease. Does having Naruto and the others around really make you feel that much better?"

"I'm just happy I can retire and hand it over to him." She slapped him in the arm. "I'm kidding. I'm kidding."

"Just talking about them seems to put our ninja in a better place mentally. As much as he did for my family and how big of a symbol that group is, I can't help but feel a little bitter it's not my brothers."

"We just had three dead people walk into the city this afternoon like they'd been out for a long walk. Who's to say Gaara and Kankuro won't show up tomorrow as well."

"Good point."

He rubbed at his eyes in a desperate attempt to stay up and converse with her a little longer.

"And I'm not entirely at ease."

"I'd be worried if you were. We still have thousands of invisible monsters ready to eat us hanging around outside the barrier."

He lightly snorted in amusement and sat up. Those things were becoming less of a concern with each pill being distributed among the ninja. He'd sought out Shino first for a full appraisal of its abilities. After getting his positive opinion, he and Nagato had them sent out. The possibility of being able to hit back immediately boosted everyone's spirits. Coupled with the official confirmation of the trio's return, both Ame and Konoha were ready to start the counterattack tonight.

Regardless, they needed to wait. Naruto didn't exaggerate, so if this Earl really was more powerful than Madara, they needed to plan accordingly. It also felt like Naruto hadn't given them all the details in his rush to get away from his father. The blonde may have done an admirable job hiding it, but he was the current Hokage for a reason.

So is this Earl the man of hate or the man of arrogance?

What honestly bothered him the most out of all of it was Naruto himself. Something felt duller about him - like his exuberance was more of an act. Naruto always had a habit of putting everything on his shoulders, but the way he cut the Yondaime off… his old teammate was facing some personal demons. The fact they were potent enough to pierce the blonde's abnormally thick head spoke volumes.

And it made Shikamaru worry.

The burly woman flung the mangled corpse of an additional friend into the fire pit as yet another chorus of cheers erupted across the camp. Hands bound in coarse rope, Adam methodically worked at loosening the tethers. With the setting of the sun, their conquerors and saboteurs became drunker on their spoils with each passing hour. He would escape soon enough, free the others, and they would make their escape into the mountains. God would provide them with the necessary foods to survive the winter, which would shield them from pursuit.

"I am sorry, Adam." The burly woman took a swig from a flask and wiped the sweat from her brow. "But to resist the Mino army, it would have meant all our deaths."

"It still will." Adam smiled sadly as he surveyed those similarly tied down . "We were seven hundred strong, living in peace. We are now twenty. The rest either slain by their neighbors or feasting alongside the barbarians who invaded not a day after we were warned of their arrival at the far end of the valley."

"We had to deceive you, Adam. If you truly knew when they arrived and prepared, it would have turned this one painful moment into a long war."

"There never would have been a war."

"You planned to trap us on this isolated track of land. For generations, our clan has never left this place."

"We have been provided everything we could ever need."

"But not what we desire." She reached down for another corpse, a fellow hunter. "We are strong, yet we hide. You have magic, but waste your days away raising plants. Why should we work in dirt and hunt our own meat when conquering another forces them to do the same for us? Why live humbly in an isolated corner when we can gain entire kingdoms?"

"It was as God asked."

"Your God. After tonight, I would like to see if you still call out to it." She spit on the ground and hoisted the body over her shoulder before tossing it in the pit. "More than twenty survived, Adam. It merely wasn't time for your group until now."

Soldiers marched up the hill, quickly forcing the prisoners to their feet. Adam calmly stood and let them guide him down the cliff side into the field below. He'd exhausted his powers attempting to repel the invaders and heal the wounded. What he did not understand until he awoke in bindings, was that the very people he healed had been the traitors wounded during their murders.

Ignore your heavy heart. You must focus on saving the others.

An altar of piled stone had been crafted in the center of the field atop the smashed remains of the year's final harvest. Streaks of red dribbled off the edges and had begun to crust on the high priest adorned in only a stained loincloth.

The Mino were infamous for sacrificing their captured opponents. Merciless beasts, every single one. Everything in their beliefs stemmed from blood. Drinking it strengthened them, shedding it pleased their gods, covering an enemy prior to death bound their soul to the Mino for an eternity.

His children huddled against him as Ileana was dragged up from the other group. Getting her feet under her, she hopped up the individual stones and stood in front of the priest as the warriors scrambled to catch up. She gave an impossibly toothy smile.

"Good evening."

Adam leaned in low by his son's head.

"Watch my son, and grasp why your mother behaves in this way."

They forced her onto her back and the wide smile only grew bolder as the priest seemed hesitant to approach.

"When we met, I questioned her eccentric manner. She told me that if you were not smiling you should be crying. She could leap about childishly with joy because she had no reason to cry."

The priest appeared to summon up his courage and poured a cup of crimson over his wife's chest.

"This is not her normally warm laugh. Look. Do you see how he fumbles with the knife? While we roll our eyes at her actions, they fear her unpredictable glee. They feel she is laughing as someone without sanity."

The priest readied his knife overhead.

"She is laughing, because they do not realize how she has already escaped."

The priest stabbed down. She kicked her feet up, catching the arm and disarming the dagger. Holding it between her heels, she slashed him across the neck then quickly flung it into the closest guard. Already on her feet by the time the others realized what had happened, she snapped his neck with her forearms and simultaneously unsheathed his sword with her toes.

"Adam, time to go my love." She cut her bindings and dove into the surrounding mob of warriors. "Hey you! How confident do you feel facing me now that you do not hold my children hostage?"

Adam calmly snapped his bindings free and forced the ground to unfurl, casting their wardens to the side. Ileana tossed a sword to him and he immediately severed the tethers around his children's wrists. He handed the blade to his son.

"Noah, go free the others."

His son nodded and quickly freed the next in line.

Blue flames covered Adam's hands and he set to work rejuvenating his imprisoned friends and family as Ileana dispatched anyone foolish enough to approach her. For what felt like hours, they battled against wave after wave of Mino and traitors, desperately inching toward the mountains.

By some miracle, they reached the base and took to the narrow winding paths that would lead them to safety. Completely out of strength, he knew his loved ones' only chance would be if he remained behind and called upon nature one last time to give them distance.

The horde approached by torchlight.

"Save them God." He pressed his hands to the ground. "Allow them to flee from these beasts. Please, grant me the power necessary to protect them.

Nothing happened.

"God?"

The mob came upon him in force, beating and binding him until he could do nothing but be dragged back to the hell his home had become. They doused him head to toe in sticky crimson and his

powers reawakened. He could feel the suffering of his village within the liquid. As if playing in front of him, every drop told a story vividly relayed by the same gift which once allowed him to heal any injury or sickness.

"His powers are immense and must be bound to our gods." The priest's voice came out scratchy as he pressed a stained cloth to his cut neck. "Place the great altar upon the fire and fill it to the brim with blood. When it boils with the heat of a demonic fever, cast him into the froth. His soul will become a slave to our gods and all who drink from the great altar."

His eyes so swollen he could barely see, Adam could only lie there and watch as they followed the religious butcher's directions. More sacrifices were made and drained into the cast iron trough. They set it directly over the fire and the pungent stench began to waft by their noses as it steamed.

He never really felt any physical pain as they unceremoniously flung him into the vat. No, the emotional hurt from witnessing - from experiencing the terror and anguish of those he loved - consumed him. Every cruel death was another crack on his mind. Even as his body faded, they clung to his soul, begging him. They looked to him now as they always had. They needed him in death as in life.

Adam. A voice called out from nowhere and everywhere. *Come and find peace.*

The begging of his extended family grew louder.

I will not seek peace His voice took on an uncharacteristic growl as the pain burrowed into him, consuming heart and mind *. I seek to become the embodiment of divine punishment!*

The Earl slowly opened his eyes as the last sensations of his memories faded away into consciousness. Clasping his hands behind his head he peered up and back at the Espada lining the top of Konoha's wall.

"Oh, did the future god send his children to come keep me company?"

"The others have orders from Aizen-sama." Ulquiorra stepped forward with his hands in his pockets. "I am to assist you in retrieving the final piece of the altar."

"Please let me guess as to what the rest of you are up to." The Earl sprung from his back directly to his feet and spun around on his toes. "You're to make life even more miserable for all the little ninja hiding behind their bubble and pester the zanpakuto wielders."

"Correct."

"It just so happens all our paths lead to the same place. I say we travel together and massacre together." The moon highlighted the mad yellow eyes behind the glasses. "It will be so much fun!"

"Very well, we should go now."

The Earl wagged a finger and shook his head.

"Patience my melancholic looking friend. We have one more companion that needs to prepare." The Earl skipped to the edge of the roof leaned over. "How are you bonding with the dark matter, Sasuke-kun?"

Fluctuating Sharingan glowed in the night as a specter struggled to take shape around him.

"Since we're waiting." The Earl faced the Espada and summoned an orb of swirling pitch in his hand. "Would anyone else like to raise their standing in the future ascendant's army?"

"Kyo, let the fox out of the cage."

"Wait a-"

"Take the cage down and stay out of this." Naruto cracked his neck to the side. "Before you start getting on my case about how I'm too emotional to do this, you need to realize I planned on doing this tonight anyway."

The samurai scowled and dismissed the bars. The Biju stretched back and forth. Casually sauntering over, all nine tails swayed lazily behind him. He stopped short of striking range and peered down at Naruto with a puzzled expression.

"What?"

"I'm wondering if you're telling the truth or seeing mommy and daddy replace you with two other brats has made you want to off yourself." The fox's lips curled up into a mocking snarl, revealing gleaming white teeth. "Did you see how close those little maggots hugged her legs? How does it make you feel, seeing them so safe and comfortable in thinking mommy is always there to protect them?"

Naruto's stomach burned as anger and adrenaline pooled in his gut. He knew the beast wanted him to lose his composure. It would make him easier to consume by either doing something stupid or making him more susceptible to the demonic influence. He needed to ignore it, bury it down deep so he could focus on what was in front of him.

"I wonder how old they are by now? I bet they never sat alone during a birthday."

"You going to take this chance to try and take over or just flap your slobbering mouth?"

"Did I brush up on a sensitive topic?"

"Not at all." Naruto grinned and lifted his arms in a shrug. "I'm only having difficulty wrapping around how the great King of the Biju would rather chatter like an old woman than possess a new vessel. I mean, if you're just lonely, I'll leave a shadow clone here for you to talk to death and take your power to go stomp the Earl."

A sound rumbled deep in the Kyubi's chest. At first, Naruto thought it was a growl and the beast was finally ready to fight. Instead, it grew louder - clearer until a low chuckle escaped his snout.

"I have been a part of you since the day you were born. That mouth of yours may fool the rest of the world, but I can see past all the bravado." The Kyubi pointed a single claw at the blonde. "I can see straight into your heart, Naruto, and it is weak."

The final three words were spoken slowly, decisively, and cruelly.

"Go to hell you damn fox!"

"We were already there you simpering brat!"

Kyubi lunged in a blur of fur and fang, tearing up the ground with every step. Naruto's eyes morphed into the golden toad shape of a sage. Jumping directly for the charging beast, a giant blue sphere, easily three times the size of Naruto's body, formed in his outstretched hand.

"Senpo: Cho Odama Rasengan!"

A tailed beast ball formed in the fox's mouth and the attacks slammed into each other. Naruto quickly used a Shunshin to launch him high into the air, summoning one thousand clones as the Bijudama destroyed the other sphere, shaking the air itself. The Bunshin army rained down in a barrage of Rasengan and wind enhanced kunai. Forming two quick seals, he sucked in a deep breath.

"Futon: Shinku Taigyoku."

A massive ball of tightly compressed air swept down as Kyubi batted at the clones with all of his many appendages. The wind came down squarely in the furry back, forcing his knees to buckle. The clones detonated as planned and the wind element fanned the fires hotter and higher.

"Shinku Rasengan."

The remaining Bunshin created a spiraling sphere with the reverse rotation, sucking the flames into it. Larger and larger the orb grew until the fox burst out of the remaining flames with a roar. The clone tossed the fiery sphere up into the path of a screeching Rasenshuriken. The projectiles melded and the single attack caught Kyubi in the side, shredding and burning away fur and flesh.

The Biju bellowed, unleashing a shockwave of energy that dispersed the attack and sent Naruto flipping backward. The blonde landed in a slide as the golden eyes faded, the nature energy depleted. The fox rapidly healed and stalked closer.

"Ready for round two, Naruto?"

"No. I've seen enough." Naruto came out of his fighting stance and scratched the back of his head with a grin that failed to reach his eyes. "You're too much for me, unfortunately."

"Is this some kind of trick or a piss poor joke?"

"I'm being honest." His gaze fell to the ground. "I'd hoped with Sage Mode I wouldn't be too outclassed and the Rasenshuriken could damage you to the point you couldn't recover… like before."

"I told you that pathetic scuffle would not compare to me at full power."

"I know, but I had to try."

Kyo came up next to him. If Naruto didn't know him, the samurai almost had what could have passed for concern on his face. He couldn't care less if his companion spirit did. A numbness crept over every inch of him with each passing second as the realization of his only option became more obvious.

"What do you plan to do now?"

"We make a deal."

"Hold on a damn-"

"I know what I'm doing, Kyo." Despite the ease of tone and confident expression, Naruto knew his skin had taken on a more ashen complexion. "You mentioned you had a girl the Earl took, which was why you signed up for becoming a zanpakuto spirit. There's a way to release you isn't there?"

Kyo's eyes widened as the scowl shifted into stun.

"How did you figure that out?"

"It was a guess. How's it work? We beat the Earl and you decide to move on?"

"Something like that. We're still a long way off from that point."

Naruto nodded and refocused on the demon.

"What are you plotting, Naruto?"

"We both know I'm going to end up fighting the Earl and we know I don't have any chance without your power. Kyo will keep it on lockdown, because if you take over, he can't get out."

Only the fox's rumbling breath answered for a moment.

"So I help you or we all die fighting that fat bastard. It echoes our original deal, but unlike then, I can merely wait out the time until the cage weakens."

"Not if I keep throwing myself into battles that force you to jump in, and we already know Kyo is willing to cut you off mid-fight if you try to escape."

"I'm failing to see the deal here."

"You agree to work with me. No possession, no jerking me around, your energy at my disposal. You uphold that, we beat the Earl, and then we go to Hueco Mundo and Kyo gets released."

"That would-"

"Be the only thing that could stop you from taking over and being reborn." Naruto ignored the bile forming in the back of his throat. "You get your freedom in an endless playground without ever having to worry about anyone imprisoning you again. The world is safe from you, and you can be left alone forever."

Silence fell over the mindscape. Naruto remained confident on the surface. This was the necessary call. Ichigo would have his hands full dealing with Aizen, and while many of the captains were more powerful than him, the Earl was coming after his group specifically. He was coming after Hinata and the few guesses why pointed to a bleak future for her. No, he was done letting things happen to her and the others.

It may have asked for too much. It may have caused him to hate it. But at the end of everything, he was a ninja, and a ninja gave of themselves to protect those they loved. He'd ignored that truth for long enough. Now, he was ready to accept that fate again.

So why did he feel sick?

"You understand once I fully have control your spirit becomes imprisoned by my will, reversing the roles as they are now." The fox sneered. "You know I will never - ever let you out."

"Yeah… yeah I do."

Kyubi turned around and walked back to his original spot.

"Put the cage back up, samurai. I'm done listening to this nonsense."

Kyo walked past and summoned the bars around the beast. Naruto's face scrunched up as confusion and a hundred other conflicted feelings gouged out his features.

"What the hell, Kyubi? I'm giving you every damn thing you wanted. Kyo gets to move on. You get your freedom. The Earl's dead and my loved ones are safe." He felt his breathing become more erratic as the words tumbled out. "You're calling that nonsense? How? Tell me, Kyubi. How is everyone getting what they want nonsense?"

"Naruto." Kyo put his arm across the blonde's chest as he stomped closer to the cage. "That's enough."

"Everybody wins!" Naruto pushed against Kyo's arm as his eyes welled up. "What? Are you offended that I said give? Fine, after Kyo's gone, I'll fight you so your pride will remain intact. Will that make you happy, Kyubi! Will that get you to do what is necessary-"

"Do not allow one more disgusting word to slip from your mouth." The tone, deep and soft as it was, carried such firmness Naruto actually took a step back. The fox kept his back to him, but brought his head over his shoulder enough that the demon eye bared down. "You are so impossibly disappointing."

Naruto felt himself shoved out of the mindscape and the forest snapped back into reality around him. He stood there for a moment, dumbstruck as his mind struggled to process the past few minutes amid the turmoil of his emotions. His hand formed a fist so tightly the smooth nails broke the skin. He slammed it into the closest tree. Again and again, he hit the rough bark as bones splintered and punctured the skin. The tree nearly gave way as he readied the stump for a final strike.

A hand caught his arm and pulled him away. Naruto whirled around with a feral snarl as Minato inspected the hand with concern. The younger blonde yanked his hand away.

No, I can't deal with this now.

"What do you need, Yondaime?"

"What-"

"Don't worry about it." Naruto shoved the crushed hand into his pocket. "What do you need, Yondaime?"

"Naruto, I-"

"If he doesn't want to talk about it, we shouldn't pressure him." Kushina stepped out from behind another tree with a shaky grin. "I did that enough last time for the both of us."

Minato stole another glance at Naruto, but remained silent.

"I really don't want to stand around here all night repeating myself. Can you please tell me what you need?"

"We wanted to apologize for what happened earlier today." Minato moved toward Kushina, giving Naruto a little more space. "We didn't want you to find out that way"

"Don't worry about it."

"Konohamaru told me I should take Jiraiya and Tsunade to the office for a surprise." Kushina tugged at her hair. "Of course he got them so excited, they took off before I could get the entire story."

Keep swallowing it down. Don't lash out at them..

"You don't owe me an explanation. They're really good names. I'm sure being trained by you two, they'll live up to them." He didn't miss them wince. "Sorry, I didn't mean it as a dig."

"It's alright."

"We wanted to invite you to come join us for dinner." The warmth in Minato's smile couldn't completely mask his sorrow. "I know they would really like to meet you."

It felt like everything under his skin was vibrating.

"That's not going to happen."

"Naruto, it's not-"

"It's not what - real?" He rubbed his face with his good hand and bit the backside of his lip, but it failed. "We're going to sit down all together and share stories and a few laughs? No, we're not doing this."

"Naruto, it's only a simple meal." Kushina took a hesitant step forward. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

Minato's smile slipped a bit as he placed a hand on her shoulder.

"We're just trying-"

"Stop. Trying."

"Naruto, -"

The words boiled up in his throat and tumbled out.

"I don't need you to try now. I needed you to try when the Kyubi was rampaging and the Sandaime begged you to let him do the sealing, and you, the great Yondaime, couldn't make the rational choice and let him do it. It was easier to believe you were the only one who could handle any complications. It was better to die as a hero and savior instead of raising the monster child. Have you ever thought about how different things would have been if you'd actually made the right call? All those lost lives from Orochimaru's attack and Akatsuki's search for the tailed beasts. All the terrible things Danzo did, because the Sandaime let him off his leash. Do you ever think about that?"

Minato stared right back at him.

"Every day. Naruto, we both spend every day regretting how badly we let you down."

"That's great! Too bad you never bothered when I actually needed you." He glared at Kushina. "You know how badly I wanted to meet you? All those times I walked home from the Academy alone after watching other kids' moms come pick them up with a hug. How badly I wanted to hear the same praise they got? To have my mom say welcome home when I arrived back from a mission? The thing is, I didn't really blame you. I knew enough about how Danzo and those other two bastards worked to understand you really didn't have a choice."

His voice went softer as his head dropped.

"The thing is I turned out fine on my own. Sure, it was a little harder, but I still wound up strong enough to protect everyone. I became a good enough person that I never wanted to unload on either of you. You guys made decisions for the good of the village. Could there have been things you should have done to not completely leave me alone? Maybe. We'll never know. I'd made peace with the fact that you were ninja, and the village came first over you… over me. I get it, and to be fair, I've made the same choices by putting Hinata and my friends in harm's way, like us coming here instead of hiding."

He shook his head as the image of those two kids, peeking out from behind Kushina's legs and all the hurt and anger stabbed him again.

"But then I got to see your new kids. How old are they? Did you even wait for the dust to settle around Madara's tower before you decided to start over?"

"They were unexpected." Kushina spoke softly. "We weren't trying to replace you."

"You can't replace something you never had. I've got to ask. You guys retire as ninja's or did you continue to be lousy parents?"

"That's enough!" A little girl's voice echoed amongst the leaves. The two kids leapt down between Naruto and the parents. "Stop talking to them that way!"

Naruto snorted.

"Guess that answers my question."

"Why are you being so mean?"

Don't say a word. Keep your mouth shut.

"Tsunade, Jiraiya, this is between your older brother and us."

They're just innocent kids who don't understand why I'm yelling at a mom and dad who they love.

"I don't care. You were trying to be nice and invite him to have dinner as a family and he's being a jerk. You're not supposed to act that way, Naruto-nisan!"

The boy nodded furiously in agreement.

"Don't you ever call me that!"

"Naruto, you can be angry with us, but don't take your anger out on them." Minato pulled the kids back. "Regardless about how you feel about Kushina and I, these two are your family."

"I don't have a family!" Naruto whipped his hands to the sides, the damaged one flicking blood across the grass. "I don't want anything to do with any of you." His voice softened into a low dead tone. I don't care about any of you."

The energy shell wrapped around him and propelled him so forcefully into the air the sky around him cracked like a whip. He did it again, sending him farther out of the city, across the vast lake and toward the approaching rain storm. His lungs wouldn't work and the

unfocused Shunshin sent him crashing and bouncing off branches until he landed roughly on his feet.

He paced around like he wanted to explode out of his skin as blurring thoughts and feelings ran haywire. Never, he never wanted to do something like that. Blaming people, playing victim, this wasn't him. He was supposed to be kind - determined. Other people gave up, other people let despair and anger drive a wedge between themselves and others.

He was supposed to be better than this. It was his job to smile when no one else did - to put on a brave face so others didn't have to worry about him. He found a way to make the impossible possible. He surmounted every single challenge.

He was supposed to be so much better than this.

The knees gave out first like the growing guilt severed the tendons themselves. His forehead hit the earth next as his hands gathered fistfuls of dirt. His mouth opened wide in a silent sob, but no air escaped. He squeezed his eyes shut and the thunder cracked - drowning out his screams.

END SECTION TWO

Author's Notes:

This was a tricky chapter on a few fronts. The first being Naruto's arrival at the Amekage office. I wanted it to have tension and weight, but on a hidden level. The fact everyone in the room suspected (or knew) about his return, and the end of the chapter being so intensive, I intentionally wrote it to be like everyone was playing their roles and keeping to business despite feelings churning under the surface. It felt a little fast on one hand, but without delving into repetition or deluding later sections of the chapter, I didn't dare stretch it out.

Developing Adam (the Earl) was something that came late in the story, but I'm glad went with it. I really enjoyed expanding on his background to show what actually "gave life" to the Earl of Millennium, and drawing parallels/similarities from his to Naruto's development makes him (at least from my point of view) a much more personal villain to our hero than Madara or even Danzo.

The other issue was Naruto's harsh exchange with the Kyubi, and immediately after, his parents. My number one concern during writing was falling into melodrama and going against the character, especially with how "Naruto-like" he handled his parents in Asunder. I tried to lay the groundwork throughout Rend up to this point and showed he was trying to resist it mentally even as the words tumbled out. I hope I handled/developed it well enough that with him finally reaching his breaking point it emerged as a powerful moment for the character and you as the reader.

Like with Asunder, Section Two is notably shorter than the first, but it fits since we're moving into the final arc(s). Don't worry, it will not be as fast as Asunder's ending. There's still a lot more to happen.

See you next week.

Abyss

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 20

Ichigo wandered around the forest as he followed Naruto's reiatsu, or rather, Bunshin's reiatsu. The clone had made it crystal clear Naruto wanted to be left alone. The only reason a very pissed off and quiet duplicate stuck around was to relay messages, check in on his training, and sit in on meetings. Hinata had taken things a little better knowing he still had enough rational thought to do that.

Bunshin didn't get into a lot of details. He simply said Naruto had it out with his parents on top of failing to tame the Kyubi and needed a little space. He'd only apologized to Hinata, but still told her to keep away. She'd respected it, even as the day passed and nighttime fully settled in again.

"What do you want, Ichigo?" The clone slumped despondently on a fallen log. "Just because I'm a clone doesn't mean I want to be around people any more than Boss."

"I managed to escape, Kurenai." Ichigo shuddered as the last illusion played out in his fresh memory. "Each new genjutsu has gotten worse so I decided to get away for a little bit. It's funny. She says the only reason I'm progressing so quickly is because I have really good control over my reiryoku."

"That is funny." Bunshin climbed to his feet. "Thanks for checking up on me."

"Naruto, I-' Ichigo balled his hands into fists. "I know you've had to bail me out a lot and I'm sorry for that. Just… you've trained me the

right way. So don't put everything on you."

Bunshin looked at Ichigo fully.

"Are you guys really that worried Boss is off pouting in the woods?"

"I'm worried he's caving under the pressure he puts on himself." Ichigo swung his arm to the side. "Didn't we get out of Hell working together? The others will be healed soon and with all of us working to-"

"The Kyubi is going to win."

Ichigo felt like ice water filled his lungs.

"What?"

"Kyo is going to move into the true afterlife someday or weaken to the point it is irrelevant if he remains as my zanpakuto." Bunshin's lips tightened into a painful grin. "Either way, the fox takes over my body. I realized it while under Jashin's control. The only way this ends is with me getting a lot furrier. The only thing I wanted, that I needed, was to make sure everyone was safe when I left them behind."

"There has to be some way to-"

"You're talking to an expert on seals, Ichigo. Nothing Boss tried worked. The only way the fox loses is if we can tame it, and last night it was obvious that's not happening." Bunshin kicked a stone hard enough it got lodged in a tree trunk. "So right after finding that out and having the Kyubi refuse to cooperate in taking down the Earl, the parents show up. Boss completely failed to handle it well."

Ichigo watched as the Bunshin became lost in his headspace. He could relate in a way, in regards to the Kyubi. He probably wouldn't handle it any better if he discovered his inner-hollow would inevitably take over. The idea of a monster imprisoning you and using your

body to terrorize your friends - he'd seen the results of it being only temporary. And the guilt and the powerlessness, there were very few futures worse than that.

If subjugation truly had been his last shot, Ichigo understood why Naruto wouldn't be in the best place after failing. It must be maddening… terrifying to have his greatest nightmare inching closer every time he closed his eyes. From what Hinata said, the blow up with the parents came from a lifetime of absence and hurt. She wouldn't go into it any more than that and he felt it would be wrong to ask. Yeah, jumbling all that together would make anyone cave, at least for a little bit.

"Anything I can do?"

"At full power, you're likely stronger than Kyubi. If he gets out before I can get to Hueco Mundo, you don't hesitate to finish him off. There won't be any chance of saving me at that point, so kill him immediately."

"Alright, I will."

A noticeable weight fell off the clone and his posture straightened a little. That alone was enough to erase the brunt of the confliction Ichigo felt about offing his favorite teacher. It wasn't right. After everything they'd already dealt with, after all the fighting, Naruto and Hinata would end up separated by death. It just wasn't right.

It's not up to me to say what he's probably thinking. Me getting upset isn't going to help him. Honoring his faith in me is all I can do to put him at ease.

"Thank you, Ichigo."

"You'd do the same for me." Ichigo squinted uncomfortably and scratched the side of his head. "And I really don't want to overstep my bounds, or make you feel worse, but can I say something in regards to the fight with your parents?"

Bunshin's shoulders slumped again as his mood visibly darkened.

"Yeah, go ahead."

"I know I'd do almost anything for a chance to see my mom smile at me one more time, but I don't know what your history is with them. They could be terrible manipulative people or you might have just never been able to see from the same point of view. All I can see is you're hurting over how yesterday went." Ichigo sucked in a calming breath to ease his discomfort. "It's alright for you to be angry. It's okay to not want anything to do with them or even continue fighting if you think someday it can bring you closer. I guess what I'm getting at is don't have any regrets. Whether you work things out or ignore them, just don't regret it… like you are right now."

Bunshin's mouth fell slightly as his eyes flicked back and forth with each thought.

"I-"

A bandage snaked out of the forest and wrapped around Ichigo's throat. Panic settled in on his face as he was yanked onto his back and dragged into the woods.

"Naruto, she's found me! Help!"

Ichigo disappeared into the shadows as his terrified cries echoed like a wailing ghost.

"I'd worried something was wrong." Shikamaru sorted a stack of papers on the coffee table of his apartment. "Thank you for telling me, Hinata."

She only managed to nod.

Luckily, Shikamaru had been preoccupied all day making sure the ninja had acclimated to the reiryoku conversion. It gave her time to

process everything herself. While returning was awkward, seeing everyone again and their expanded families had been wonderful. Seeing who Hanabi had become made her heart swell. And for her father to shed tears upon seeing her - it moved her more than words could describe.

It was all at Naruto's encouragement. He'd reasoned that being team leader for their arrival mission meant he'd be the one who had to update the Hokage while others spent time catching up. When she questioned it, he simply smiled and said he didn't mind at all.

She'd left him alone when she knew coming back here would bring a lot of what had been plaguing him to the forefront. She knew it and still stupidly listened when he told her to go see her family.

I should have been there with him.

His parents had come to her nearly frantic after he left. They explained everything and begged her to check on him. She went out immediately, only for Bunshin to intercept her and say the real Naruto was fine and needed space. The clone said he was sorry and walked away from her. It'd been a full day and Naruto still hadn't come back inside the barrier. The clone wouldn't talk to her or anyone unless it revolved around planning for the Earl.

And worse still, Shikamaru had called her here and demanded an explanation about everything. Their revival, Soul Society, and more importantly, everything Naruto had talked to her about. She hated it. It made her feel like she was betraying him with each word. But their former teammate was right, he needed to understand the situation entirely. If he put a weak link in the plan, a lot of people could die. As much as she refused to consider Naruto a weak link, he obviously decided to handle this situation separate from the rest of them.

He'd always been that way to a degree, but something changed after Hell. It'd become something more desperate and isolating.

It was like staring at the back of that lonely child swinging in front of the Academy as the sunlight faded into dusk.

"I have failed Naruto-kun as a friend." Lee hung his head in shame. "I was so excited to see Gai-sensei I never paid attention to the fact he was hurting."

"Naruto chooses to hide things and does it well." Shino leaned up against the wall with his hands in the pockets of his coat. "To be disappointed in yourself is pointless. He did not want any of us to know."

"I hate to say the situation with Naruto can wait, but I have to." Shikamaru frowned and leaned back in the couch. "This Earl and Aizen are likely the two men written in the Toad Sage's final prophesy. That alone means we don't win easily if at all. Making things worse is the fact they are both more powerful than Madara. Shino knows this, but for you two, he is often referred to as the demon god. I'm not going to get into all the connotations that puts into this whole mess. Instead, I'll summarize everything with a question. Are you guys fighting with us or are we on our own?"

Hinata's eyes narrowed.

"I don't appreciate how that questions sounds, Shikamaru-san."

"Trust me, I hate asking it. As your friend and teammate, and we are still teammates." Shikamaru emphasized the 'are.' "I want to give you the benefit of the doubt. Unfortunately, I'm not in a position where I can automatically shrug my shoulders and say you'll come through when it counts."

"Travelling into Hell was an enormous risk. We wouldn't go through that just to abandon you now."

"I'm not saying you would, but there's a difference between me giving you objectives - building our forces around those objectives, and you guys doing your own thing. Naruto made it perfectly clear

you guys would handle the Earl and Aizen and we were supposed to sit back. I understand the village and my predecessor leaned hard on him and you two those last few months. I get out of our team you three were the strongest and are probably the only ones who can fight this thing. But that doesn't mean the rest of us can't back you up. This isn't Madara immediately after Danzo's insurrection and Pain's invasion punctuated by Kyubi's final rampage. Shino and I aren't unable to help this time. The ninja aren't helpless this time."

Shikamaru leaned forward as tears hugged in the corners of his eyes.

"You don't have to sacrifice yourselves again."

Shino placed a comforting hand on her shoulder as Lee literally shook with a pumped fist.

"Yosh, well said Shikamaru-kun." He leapt to his feet. "We must find Naruto-kun immediately so he can be a part of this reunion."

"I agree. He may forget us if too much time passes between our meetings."

Hinata giggled into her fist as she fought back the torrent of emotions swirling within her.

Naruto-kun, I wish you were here. I know you often feel alone, but if you could see them now, you would see that our team - our friends want you to be beside them. They want you to be happy.

"How long are you going to sit out here moping?"

Naruto groggily looked up with bleary eyes. The moon highlighted the telltale scar over the bridge of the man's nose and his fists rested on his hips.

"Iruka-sensei?" The blond perked up immediately. "What are you doing outside the barrier? It's dangerous, you know!"

"I don't see any hollows around here, and thanks to you, I could if they were around." Iruka unrolled a scroll and made a hand seal, releasing the two ramen bowls sealed inside. "Before you ask, yes, it is Ichiraku's. Supposedly, the first thing Teuchi did upon arriving in Ame is find a ramen stand and challenge the owner to a contest to decide who would be head cook."

"Is that actually a thing?"

"Does it matter?" Iruka sat down across from Naruto and handed him a bowl with some chopsticks. "I bought a bunch so pig out."

"I-"

"I spent a month's pay on this meal so unless your next words are 'thank you', start shoving noodles in your mouth."

Naruto sat up rigidly under the familiar glare and began slurping down.

Holy crap, this tastes better than I remember!

"Now there's a face I prefer." Iruka sipped at the broth. "Taking you to that stand always could get you out of your worst moods. Oh, here, let me show you something." Iruka reached into his pocket and handed a small photo over. Naruto kept eating with one hand and chewed on a vegetable as he studied the picture. "That's my son and daughter. Her name is Kana and his is Naruto, but we call him Naru for short."

Have they forgotten how to come up with new names or something?

He's a lot like you, hyperactive and stubborn, but a really good kid. You have to meet him soon or he'll bring the city down trying to find you."

"Why's that?"

"You're his idol, Naruto. He intentionally fails lessons in class so that he can graduate at the bottom like you did, drives me crazy."

Naruto gave a short laugh and stared at the girl.

"Why does she look familiar?"

"You remember Anko right? She's their mom."

The blonde started choking and pounded his chest to get the un-chewed noodles down.

"The crazy snake lady?"

"She's not that bad once you get to know her. Ready for another bowl?" Iruka unsealed the next one and handed it over. "Your answer is yes."

Naruto accepted it with an embarrassed mumble of gratitude and dug in.

"So, you and Hinata have kids yet?" Naruto started choking and sputtering on the noodles, undergoing the same dislodging process as last time. "I'll take that as a no. Man, Naruto you act like you haven't even…"

Starting at the base of his neck, a nearly glowing red pigment crept up Naruto's face.

"Can you even have sex in the afterlife?"

"When the hell did you get so freaking blunt, Iruka-sensei?"

"Sorry." The teacher grinned sheepishly. "It sort of happens when you're around Anko a lot."

"I fear for your kids."

"No sympathy for the guy who has to live with them huh?" Iruka got another bowl. "So, tell me what it's like on the other side."

"Pretty similar to this. You have people who live as civilians. You have fighters who protect them and the stronger ones take the brunt of the responsibility. It's pretty much the same, but with worse ramen."

"You don't sound like you enjoy it very much."

Naruto fell silent and rested his chopsticks on the top of the bowl.

"It's not that bad. My problems come from the fact that I just don't want to fight anymore and I'm forced to. No, that's not completely right."

"It's weird seeing you unable to voice your thoughts."

"I know, right? I guess it really comes down to that I don't know how to not fight. I paid my dues. The people I care about shouldn't have to die again because no one else can step up and that's what's going to happen. Even if it isn't this time with these bastards, there will be another. Running and letting someone else pull the weight is the smartest and safest option, but I can't seem to do it. And that's why I'm pissed. My heart wants me to keep fighting, but the doubt in my head won't shut up. I don't get why I can't fully commit to a choice, whatever that choice would be. Why?"

"It's because you're strong and have a big heart." Naruto nearly dropped the bowl as Kakashi wheeled up next to them. "Mind if I join you guys?"

"You're late, Kakashi." Iruka handed the extra bowl. "Here's yours."

Naruto's head whipped back and forth as his face scrunched up like a fish.

"Wha- how?"

"Your father rescued me from the tower moments before your attack took out the top of it. He tried to get to the rest of you as well, but there was no way to save you three." Kakashi's eye took on its familiar smile-like shape. "It's good to see you again, Naruto."

Yamamoto stared at the small vault embedded in the ground. Hidden multiple floors below the First Division compound, it would be nearly impossible to find the diminutive room hidden within a maze of false halls. He opened the hatch and retrieved an ornate key.

This particular Oken, allowed the Commander of the Shinigami access to the Royal Palace and the Soul King. Unlike those engraved into the bones of the Royal Guard, this could not be activated at will. It only provided him the means to contact that realm and request an audience with its residents. Should they accept, they would open a gateway from their side.

He never assumed such a day would come that he would be forced to go before the King. However, events had pushed him far enough he needed the counsel of someone in a higher authority. As a being who had an intimate history with Soul Society, no other would be able to provide him with adequate advice about the Earl and the threat of the world collapsing.

The key glowed as he held it up before his face.

"This is Genryusai Shigekuni Yamamoto, the Captain-Commander of the Gotei 13. I request an audience with the Soul King."

"He's doing okay, Uzumaki-san." Hinata nibbled on a cinnamon roll as Kushina stared at hers undisturbed on the plate. "I have been keeping an eye on him with my extended vision. Iruka-san and Kakashi-san visited him last night. They spent several hours eating ramen together. It's put him in a better place."

"That's good." Kushina bowed her head down. "I'm sorry. He'd probably get really upset if he knew we were talking. I don't want to cause any more problems than I already have."

"Naruto-kun is overprotective at times, but he's not controlling. He would never tell me not to speak with someone."

"He wouldn't want me checking up on him though." A pained smile stretched out over her lips. "I've never been very good at letting things be."

Considering all the years he chased Sasuke, it is a trait very prevalent in Naruto as well.

"Uzumaki-san, I remember when you two first met and that meeting in his apartment. It was a meeting of strangers. He couldn't be angry with you and you couldn't care about him for any other reason than he was your son." Hinata set the bun on her plate. "Something changed in Naruto upon our awakening as souls. I don't know if it's fear or defeat or something else, but I do know, you and Minato-san have been on his mind. Just as I'm sure you learned a great deal from everyone about Naruto Uzumaki the person, he has actually had time to think about you and everything surrounding you."

"And he came to the conclusion he hates us." Kushina tugged on a strand of her hair. "He has every right to."

"I think he finally came to terms with the fact he wasn't okay with what happened. I know he's likely feeling very guilty about what he did right now, but at the heart of it, he felt connected to you enough to be angry and hurt. That's not something you do with people you have no interest in. And showing vulnerability isn't something he would do with someone he hates." Hinata's features radiated kindness as Kushina stared at her with surprise. "I don't know what Naruto-kun wants with you in the future. What I do know is he has been burdened with many things. By letting him vent and fully acknowledge his heart, you and Minato-san probably did more to

help Naruto-kun overcome his despair in that moment than I have been able to do in our entire time together."

Kushina blinked in awe as Hinata began working on her food again. It hurt a little, admitting that aloud. She wanted to be there for Naruto and ease his sorrow herself, just as he had done for her. The fact she couldn't do that - that she couldn't be the person to save him from his troubles, it was a little bitter. It was wrong of her to feel that way though. What mattered was that, whatever happened, brought him a small degree of resolution. It didn't matter whether it was his parents or Iruka-san or anyone as long as it helped bring him back to her.

Kushina reached out with both hands and snatched up hers. The long red locks draped over the sides of her face as droplets rained down on the table.

"It was you." Kushina's voice trembled with repressed sobs. "Your bond with him has done so much to make his life full. Thank you. Thank you."

Nagato's ringed eyes snapped open as the chakra drawn by the barrier spiked.

"They're here!"

Yammy rubbed the burnt skin on his knuckles and sneered at the barrier.

"This bitch is pretty tough, but I'll crack her." He drew his zanpakuto. "Buchikirero, Ira!"

His reiatsu exploded in a red aura, splitting the lake into tidal waves hundreds of feet high. It intensified, blinding onlookers from seeing the transformation taking place. The aura grew alongside his already giant build. A titanic fist emerged first as the surge ceased and the

water began to return. Sixteen elephant feet traveled along his elongated lower body as a club like tail thrashed in the air. Purplish tubes and knobs adorned his humanoid torso as a jaw of pure bone grit against exposed teeth.

He slammed both fists down on the barrier and dug his fingers in, peeling open a small gap for the other Arrancar to bypass the dome.

Naruto stood on the lake with his arms folded over his chest and gold eyes glaring up at the Arrancar filing in. The big one had chosen to stay outside and wail on the barrier. The blonde could sense a swarm of hollows approaching, which meant they knew the field was going to collapse soon.

They were in for a rude awakening. The ninja were hungry for payback, and from what he could sense, those monsters wouldn't know what hit them.

The Arrancar were a different matter. At least three of them were Espada level and the rest weren't slouches. Fighting them in the city would guarantee hundreds of casualties, civilian and ninja alike. No, he needed to stop them here and hope the others would make it to him in time. He'd already sent a clone ahead to find Lee and have him protect Ichigo so his training wouldn't be interrupted. Being ready to stop Aizen had to remain his student's goal. Anything else would be a distraction.

His zanpakuto shot into his right hand as a regular kunai sprung from its hidden holster into his left. Pushing pure wind element into the blades, razor edges of blue energy extended the weapons' lethality. He slashed inward as he poured more energy into the weapons, stretching them out far enough the Arrancar needed to dodge, bunching them closer together.

He blew wind infused reiryoku over the normal kunai as the energy edge dissipated. Clenching the zanpakuto in his teeth, he flung the vacuum blade and whipped through a series of hand seals. One

wind-charged kunai became thousands, whistling across the sky directly for the Arrancar.

I won't get all of them, but I should be able to pick off anyone who dodges.

The squad of indistinguishable men wearing human skulls dove in front of the rest, the kunai impaled them a hundred times over, shielding the others from all harm. They died without so much as a grunt.

Or not.

"How dare you attack Harribel-sama!" The tomboyish one with the blue hair ranted. "Sung-Sun, Mila Rose, let's show this punk he doesn't have the right to do as he pleases."

Naruto grit his teeth and readied himself as they lunged down from the sky. He cursed as the remaining Arrancar took off for the city. Reiryoku surged into his muscles as the three women drew their weapons. He weaved between them with an internal Shunshin, tapped them in various places, and landed a medium distance away.

"Running away after groping us, tough guy?" The tomboy snarled. Naruto squeezed his eyes shut and plugged his ears. "What the hell are-"

The custom exploding tags detonated on their backs, inciting the others he'd placed under various limbs. The heat singed the hairs in his nose and sucked the air from his lungs as the blowout nearly knocked him over.

No matter what anyone else says, my tags work fine.

Their smoking bodies slid beneath the lake's surface and into its depths. He tucked his special kunai back under his sleeve and glanced over at the city. Only three of the weaker members down and the others were already in the city. It'd be smarter to try and take

out the four story giant before he collapsed the barrier so the ninja could focus on the bigger threats in units.

It was good they hadn't attacked earlier than last night. Being able to talk with his two old teachers had centered him. He felt more assured his actions were right. Sure, being sealed within Kyubi for all eternity wasn't going to change, but he resigned himself to that. It was the rest of it. The desperation and everything else mixing him up had settled into an easy contentment.

The talking had been long. They laughed at old stories, shared moments of silence for the fallen, caught up, and ultimately, delved into more serious topics. Almost detachedly, he'd laid everything out, even the bit about his temporary problem forming a Rasengan because of phantom pain. He felt ashamed at the beginning - weak. But as they kept prodding him and added their own experiences, it became more enlightening. Surprisingly, it'd been Kakashi-sensei who really made him understand his inner-conflict.

Any ninja who faced death or loss is going through the same thing you are, Naruto. I have, your parents have, every Hokage has, all of us reach a point when our idealism crashes with the reality in front of us. We question if the cause is worth the personal trauma. Many ninja retire when they face it. Others, like Madara and Orochimaru, become obsessed with finding ways to enforce their ideal and become deranged. The rest of us learn how to accept it. People like Danzo embrace it. And fewer still, the rare ones keep fighting for an ideal within the hardships of reality.

Who knew the usually detached jonin could come up with something so heartfelt?

Three reiatsu spiked from the bottom of the lake, merging into one oppressive force.

"They're barely alive. How are they still ready to fight?"

It shot up like a torpedo, water churning violently around its ascension as wrathful red reiatsu caused Naruto's breath to catch. The behemoth burst out inches in front of him. The lake's contents dripped off the deer skull and antlers, sliding between muscles layered within muscles, and ultimately absorbing into the patches of brown fur. A long snake tail snapped dangerously around the cloven-hooves making up its feet.

A pair of bloodshot yellow eyes bulged out from the furry mane on its head, wiggling around until they zeroed in on the blonde.

"Well, shi-"

A humongous mouth opened beneath the deer skull and the creature bellowed. It carried the same dull reverberation as all hollow, but was accompanied by a violent undertone and stinging reiatsu. It rushed him so quickly he barely had a chance to twist out of the way.

"Rasengan!" Naruto smashed the orb into the creature's back, forcing it to stumble forward a few steps. Its head swiveled around a complete one hundred and eighty degrees. "Um, hi?"

Its tail cracked an inch away from his nose, distracting him from its engorging arm as it reached back at a dislocating angle and caught his leg. Arcing directly over the top like it lacked a shoulder joint, the beast slammed Naruto against the water so hard his body failed to break its surface. Nearly delirious from the blow, the blonde made the cross seal and summoned two Kage Bunshin. They vaulted onto the creature's shoulders and stabbed into its neck.

All its muscles swelled and the creature became more imposing as it nearly doubled in size. Its reiatsu dispelled the clones as Naruto sliced its fingers off to escape, only to be tackled into the water. Deeper and deeper the monster forced him as the waters darkened and became colder.

Naruto summoned another Rasengan and the creature intercepted the attack with its bare palm and made a fist, crushing the orb and

his hand along with it. Triggering his zanpakuto to his hand, the blue reiryoku highlighted its edge. He slashed furiously, nearly black blood seeping into the water as Naruto struggled to hack away enough to get free. The beast punched him into the lakebed and pinned him.

Naruto's muscles started to grow heavy as the last of the limited oxygen stored in his lungs dwindled. The nature energy faded, preventing him from wrestling free. He bit back on his body's instincts to panic. The Rasengan wasn't powerful enough. The Rasenshuriken would kill them both at this range, and none of his wind techniques could work without available air.

Think damn it!

More precious bubbles escaped his mouth as its fingers cruelly sunk into his torso. Streams of foamy bubbles escaped its nose as it pressed harder. Naruto summoned a dozen clones to pull its arm off him. They managed to do so enough for him to worm out and swim straight for its chest, driving the special kunai between its ribs and directly into its lungs.

Mizuchi!

The technique turned the air stored in the beast's organs into powerful blades of wind, erupting outward, and slicing the beast to ribbons. The navy blue water became a murky red as the pieces separated and sunk.

Naruto kicked hard and swam as his lungs burned for air. Every movement became harder as the reiryoku flooding his system halted from his slowing brain. He stilled as coherent thoughts short-circuited. His vision tunneled and he inhaled for relief - the icy cold water soothing his once empty lungs.

Hinata rode Kushina's wind high above the city. Spotting the blonde female Arrancar, she formed a platform of reiryoku under her feet

just stable enough to spring off of. She swooped down on the unsuspecting woman, raking her claws down. The blonde spun while drawing her sword, the force of Hinata's dive driving them to the ground and cracking the street as they landed in a struggle.

"You are one of the special zanpakuto wielders. I am Tier Harribel and I am thankful you have saved me the trouble of finding you."

She knocked Hinata's arms away and attempted to cut down, but they clashed in a stalemate again.

"The one male wearing orange has already fallen to the Tres Bestias." The Arrancar pushed against the lock harder. "Where are the other two?"

"I have no reason to reveal that information to you. As for Naruto, he won't be defeated so easily."

"He did severely damage my Fraccion and destroy their chimera. As much as it angers me that he hurt them, he is paying for it at the bottom of that lake. Life does not exist without air."

A gentle band of air dragged her away an instant before a vortex of slicing gales crashed down a top the Arrancar like a waterfall and ripped up the street. Kushina emerged from the wind with a hateful glare, her hair splayed out as more zephyr churned around her.

"Hinata-chan, is she telling the truth?"

She expanded the range of her vision and gasped as she caught sight of Naruto. His heartbeat was barely functioning as his reiatsu had dropped under what it would be even unconscious.

"Yes."

"You're faster and know exactly where he is. Go, I've got her."

Hinata swallowed the grief rising within her with each softer pulse of his life

"You can't handle her alone and I can't make it in time. He's-"

"Uzumaki's are notoriously difficult to kill even in cases when death should be certain. I'm sure you can rationalize a hundred reasons why ignoring him and staying to fight the enemy is the right call. But for once, we're putting Naruto ahead of everyone else. Now go!"

Hinata took one last look at the Arrancar, then ran as fast as she could in Naruto's direction.

"What purpose is there in sending her away?"

Kushina craned her neck to the side so it cracked and eased the tension in it. She wasn't bluffing or delusional in what she said. Uzumaki life force was on a different level. Of course, the Kyubi healed the worst of Naruto's damage, but people underestimated how big a part his genes played in his survivability. She remembered as a kid seeing people near death bounce back. That included drowning.

I think the highest recorded full recovery was thirteen minutes of no air.

"I've failed my son enough already. If there's even a chance she can save him, it's worth the hassle of taking you on alone."

"And you feel your death will atone for these failures?"

Her nose crinkled up as her bottom lip jut out. Did she really appear so pitiful? There was no simple fix for what she'd done. All dying possibly accomplished would be to potentially guilt him into forgiving her. It'd also leave Jiraiya and Tsunade with the same void as her eldest, failing all three. No, if Naruto ever did approach her and attempt reconciliation, it would be a long challenging road to earning his trust and love.

And she'd crawl it all on her belly if it proved how sorry she was for everything.

"I've got two more kids still young enough they depend on me. I'm not dying."

"Your reiatsu is far weaker than mine."

"Lady, I don't know what the hell you just said, but I'm no weakling." Kushina curled her fingers so the knuckles popped. "Life does not exist in pieces, bitch."

Shikamaru yawned and stepped out into the sunlight, confronting the oddly dressed man floating to the ground. Bony spikes lined his head like a Mohawk, a sharp contrast to the dark bald skin on his head. The man touched down as the civilians scrambled to get away. These Arrancar, as Hinata called them, to brazenly land in the middle of a ninja village with no discretion, really had no concept of tactics. However, he was likely powerful enough the ninja didn't really concern him. Maybe, he was one of those Espada guys. Man, wouldn't that be his luck? He tells everyone to stay clear of the area and he gets stuck with a strong guy.

He definitely outclasses me in terms of energy. With this new spiritual awareness, I can feel power rolling off this guy.

"You do not flee like the other humans. Why?"

"It comes with the job."

"I see. I am Zommari Rureaux, the seventh Espada."

"Huh?" Shikamaru quirked an eyebrow.

"Do you not feel it necessary to give me your name or title, human?"

"Sorry, we don't usually introduce ourselves before a fight." The ninja put his hands in his pockets. "Shikamaru Nara, the Rokudaime Hokage."

"Hokage, what does such a title designate?"

"I'm the leader of a village."

"I see." Zommari bowed at the waist. "Then, I shall do my best to consider a mere human like you my equal."

"… Thanks?"

"However, do not be mistaken. This is no fight." The Arrancar disappeared and the air shuddered as he reappeared behind Shikamaru. "This is extermination."

Zommari's face tightened as he went to swing with his zanpakuto and suddenly froze.

"Kageshibari no Jutsu." Shikamaru glanced over his shoulder. "Now, what are you doing back there?"

"You sound pleased with yourself, Hokage." The pressure in the air thickened as the Arrancar pushed harder against his paralysis and his katana inched closer to Shikamaru's head. Suddenly, he extended a finger and red energy gathered around it. "Cero."

Shikamaru dove out of the way as the beam destroyed a weapons shop. Rolling to his feet, two Zommari attacked from either side. Shikamaru ducked and drew his trench knives, blocking one attacker and stabbing the other.

"I assumed you would have difficulty seeing past my speed." Another Zommari appeared and stabbed from the front as the hurt one bled and faded away. "I alone can use Gemelos Sonido, and I have mastered it to a degree at which I can manifest five duplicates by my sheer quickness. Shall I demonstrate?"

The stabbing one separated into multiple copies. They circled him and prepared for a simultaneous strike.

"Kage Nui no Jutsu."

Shadow threads pierced their feet and then stitched up along each body until it stabbed them in the hearts. The real one in the front stumbled back and more tendrils pulled him down onto his back as a hissing sound came from beneath him. Naruto's custom tag detonated and the Arrancar's body remained held down by the shadow threads until the explosion cratered that section of the street.

He still hasn't toned them down at all has he?

Repressing the urge to cringe at the memory of his previous experience with the tags, he pocketed his trench knives and watched the smoke drift skyward. Early reports indicated the invading force was limited enough to keep the bulk of the ninja on standby in case they brought the barrier down. The Arrancar would be dealt with by S-Rank and higher.

The smoke blasted away as Zommari's reiatsu climbed. Ignoring the hairs standing on the back of his neck and the urge to shield his face from the dust, Shikamaru watched as the transformed Arrancar hovered above the crater. Legs obscured by a pink sphere, the man had his hands pressed together in a prayer as an unsettling amount of eyes opened all over his body.

This must be a Resurreccion. It really does elevate them onto another level.

"I must apologize. Though I stated I would consider you my equal, as a human, I did not believe you would harm me - challenge me, enough to release my zanpakuto. Fret not, for I shall rectify my arrogance."

Shikamaru felt something shudder against his left arm. He glanced down at the strange tattoo forming over his bicep. His hand shot out

of his pocket and tightly clutched his throat, cutting off his airflow.

"Under the gaze of my Brujeria and its ability, Amor, I steal the sovereignty of whatever these eyes rest upon."

Shikamaru twisted to the side and bound his hand with a shadow followed by the rest of his body. He only needed a single hand to manipulate his shadows, and using the threads to move his body like a puppet wouldn't be too difficult.

"A proactive approach, binding your entire body so it will not betray you. However, it is futile when all I must do is govern your head to control all of you."

Shikamaru used a tendril to snag a stray piece of debris and barely pulled it in front of his face as another tattoo formed on it. He moved the stone just enough to see most of Zommari's body.

Why are there more than two eyes closed?

"Again I praise your thinking, but as I said before, anything under these eyes will become mine." The shadow threads tightened around Shikamaru so much they threatened to eat into the skin. "If you control shadow, I will merely remove that control."

The umbra coiled around him, gliding to his neck.

A lone spear shot up from Zommari's isolated shadow and punctured the glowing eye. The lid snapped shut and the bindings loosened. Bringing his hands into a rat seal, fifty-five wide needles formed and stabbed for each of the Arrancar's eyes. The remaining eyes glowed purple and the tendrils froze.

"How did you surmise the exact number of eyes upon my body, Hokage?"

"They are completely symmetrical so it comes down to basic math."

"And the ones upon my forehead?"

"The lines on your head were too defined to be tattoos so I chose to count them as insurance."

"I congratulate you. Your intelligence is a testament to your kind." The shadow spikes reared around and faced Shikamaru. "You are not my equal, but I salute your attempts."

The shadows ignited as the tags hidden within them detonated. Immediately, more replaced them, jutting through the smoke and flames to spear every eye on Zommari's body. The Arrancar cried out and clawed at his face as the shadows severed the sensitive organs.

"Hinata was right. If you guys stopped constantly talking and revealing your abilities, you would be unstoppable." Shikamaru returned his hands to his pockets. "I'm not complaining. Explaining everything you're doing certainly makes it easier for us."

"How? I robbed your technique of its sovereignty?"

"You did, but you never noticed those needles were wider than the others. When I initially tied myself down, I had my shadow's remove the tags from my back pockets, travel down the back of my leg, and hide them around you. Knowing you would steal my technique, I placed the tags on a timer and waited for them to explode, obscuring your gaze and letting me reform them as new shadows."

"Damn you! Damn you, human!"

"So much for your attempted respect." Shikamaru made the dog then rat hand seals. "Kage Kiritori."

"Mercy!"

The shadows took on a thin solid edge and whipped down, chopping into Zommari's skin followed by a quick drag clean across the body. He ended the slicing attack and the compromised body structure collapsed under its own weight into a bloody heap.

"You treated my people like cattle." Shikamaru put his hands back in his pockets and walked away as Zommari's remains slowly dissolved. "You don't get mercy."

Fifty tri-pronged kunai struck the ground amongst the skull-clad squad marching into the city's market place. A rapid flurry of yellow flashes struck each soldier, felling them in a single pass. Their leader in the center, adorned in an oxen skull, used a Sonido to escape the field of kunai. One sailed directly for his face. He unsheathed his katana and knocked it aside.

"Hiraishin: Ni no Dan."

Minato appeared above and slammed a Rasengan down on the bone helmet. Burrowing in the back, the orb nearly broke the skull, but the Arrancar sped to the side, placing a safe distance between him and any kunai.

"You ninja have a habit of sneak attacks. I suppose weaker creatures like you must do that in order to survive."

Minato landed on the ground silently

"We prefer to view it as strategic."

"I did not say it wasn't. Every creature must do what it can to survive. I was merely thinking out loud." The Arrancar brought his katana up in front of him. "Rudbornn Chelute of the Exequias."

"Minato Namikaze of Konoha." Minato's lips curved up slightly. "You're rather well mannered."

"As an executioner, it is best to not incite those sentenced to death."

"That sounds a little less friendly."

"Oiagare, Arbol."

Branches grew from Rudbornn's back as roots wrapped around his legs, extending down and lifting him into the air like stilts. Skulls formed on the tips of the branches like fruit and bodies quickly poured out of their bases, reforming the squad of identical soldiers.

"I can produce an unlimited number of these Calaveras and they will shield me from any harm." The tip of his mask tilted down and the blank eyes bore down on Minato. "You cannot hope to defeat this godlike power."

Minato slipped into the colorless world of the Hiraishin and began collecting the kunai he'd used earlier, only leaving a few well hidden ones behind. Leaving the zone, he summoned two shadow clones and had them begin dispersing the kunai again by using the Hiraishin themselves. One Bunshin dodged a soldier's attack and stabbed it between the eyes. Its skull bulged and malignant purple energy exploded from the wound, bathing the clone and rotting it out of existence as the energy faded into vapor.

That matches the description of what Shikamaru-san called dark matter

He gripped his heart and stumbled to his knees as liquid fire coursed through his veins, sending every nerve into a panicked spasm.

"I see you've inhaled traces of the dark matter that evaporated into the air." Rudbornn created another puppet to replace the destroyed one. "You must be quite unlucky, since it does not exist for long after use."

Minato pushed himself up as the pain faded. If that reaction occurred from a small trace, he couldn't afford to make any further contact. That drastically reduced his options as a close range fighter. He'd need to rely on a clone to get close enough for a finishing blow.

"Do not think I will let you stand there and plot." The skulls fell from the branches and orbs of dark matter formed in their place. "Blood bullet!"

Minato vanished again and reappeared behind the Arrancar. The mass produced troops barricaded themselves around their creator as he continued to fire.

He's hitting the kunai and burning off the seals… clever.

His remaining Bunshin went to strike with a Rasengan as Rudbornn fired directly into it. The blue orb deflected the attack and snapped a horn off the oxen skull as the clone was impaled by the Calaveras.

Grasping three kunai in each fist, Minato zipped forward low to the ground, dodging the soldiers with ease. The roots twisted Rudbornn toward him as the branches readied to fire again. He tossed the kunai up so they surrounded the Arrancar and summoned a Rasengan in each hand. The executioner fired, but Minato deflected and evaded each blast.

"Rasen Senko." He flashed to Rudbornn's side. "Cho Rinbuko." He struck with the first one, teleported to the other side, hit with the second, and repeated, moving so rapidly the orbs continued to burrow on their own instead of dissipating. "Sanshiki!"

He appeared as a flicker of light, keeping the kunai hovering in the air and striking with Rasengan faster than they could cease with his hand absent. Faster he struck until a constant golden stream revolved around the executioner. The Calaveras all leapt for the vortex.

Minato appeared at Rudbornn's stomach, placed a final Rasengan against it, and teleported for the kunai directly behind the Arrancar's back. The instantaneous acceleration drove the sphere into the body, allowing for the orb to unleash its damage from the inside out.

The Yondaime warped away as dark energy began to dribble out of the mask's orifices. The common soldiers exploded into miasma as Rudbornn devolved and collapsed onto the street. The malevolent energy mercilessly ate away at his body, drying it out like flame until the corpse caught in the air as ash.

Minato landed safely outside the deconstruction's radius. His hand spasmed and the pain quickly raced up his arm. A dull purple traced along his veins as patches of necrotic flesh dotted his body. He wheezed and collapsed back against a wall as more patches appeared on his face.

This is a lot more painful than my last death.

Focusing past his agony, he forced reiryoku through his body, trying to purge the malignant energy like he would a poison. However, the dark matter's potency won out and resumed its infectious spread.

I'm sorry, Tsunade, Jiraiya. I'm sorry, Naruto. It looks like I have to leave everything to you again. I'd really wanted to take some of the burden off of you this time around.

"I had hoped that doujutsu had disappeared from this world." Nagato's Rinnegan glowed in the shadows of his office. "There has been enough misery because of those cursed eyes of yours, Sasuke Uchiha."

Blood red Sharingan cut through the darkness as he approached Nagato's amplification chair.

"You know who I am?"

"I knew from my scrutiny of Orochimaru he'd gained another foolish vessel. Madara Uchiha had plans for you should Itachi die. So yes, I am well aware of who you are and your exploits." The tubes broke away with a hiss and Nagato stood. "I am also aware of your unstable personality and the risk you pose to my people just by being within Amegakure's walls."

"For today, I pose no threat to the insects fleeing from the streets."

"And why is that?"

"Because I'm only here for you."

Hinata leapt back as a bright green cero carved a chunk out of the street before her. The solemn looking Arrancar kept one hand nonchalantly in his pocket as the Earl rocked back onto his heels and clasped his hands behind his back.

"Get out of my way." Hinata squeezed one of her clawed hands into a fist. "Now."

"Ah, I see you are in a hurry to reach dear Naruto-kun." The Earl's eyes glint behind his glasses. "Unfortunately, my dear Hinata, you will have to make time for us."

She punched the air, focusing her reiatsu into a compressed shockwave. The Arrancar didn't have time to block and the pressure struck him in the gut, making him stumble back a few steps.

"That was a warning blow, Arrancar-san. I would prefer not to spend time doing anything more."

The Earl giggled and rolled onto his back while he kicked his legs like a toddler.

"Oh, to knock back the fourth Espada is no mere task, my dear. Why, even you have a rare visage of shock, Ulquiorra."

The Espada collected himself and regained his posture.

"I stand corrected in my assumption of these other-world Shinigami. I likely will need to draw my sword to kill her."

I'd hoped he would be fragile enough to scare off.

She refocused briefly on Naruto. True to Kushina's claim, his heart still beat - weakly. It only provided a slim chance the lack of air hadn't

already done irreparable damage. Every second wasted diminished her already infinitesimally small window.

"I do not suppose I could convince you to come with me, Hinata-chan. Oh, how my excitement grows to see your reaction to the wonderful wedding I have prepared for you." The Earl sprung to his feet and leaned in with a waving finger. "You still have time to choose your groom. It truly would make me happy for it to be Naruto-kun, but alas, I do not see him complying even after I capture his spirit like the beloveds of those companions housed in your weapons."

The air trembled behind her and she dropped to the ground as Ulquiorra's katana swung across where her head had been. She drove an elbow back and extended into a straight arm as he moved away. He blocked, the spiritual metals sparking upon contact. Hinata kicked at his head then gracefully flowed into a flip as he tried to move from block to horizontal slice.

"Shugohakke Kuhekisho!"

A blue wave erupted out of her palm, blasting him to the ground. Her reiryoku sword formed around her free hand and she stabbed for his face. It pierced barren street as he zipped away with a Sonido.

An explosion from the top floor of Nagato's tower rocked the city, tossing chunks of stone and debris hundreds of feet in all directions. She expanded her vision, spotting Sasuke standing over a kneeling Amekage. She barely caught it before it vanished, but a strange manifestation had surrounded Sasuke for a moment. His energy was so much more oppressive than a few days earlier.

The Earl infused him with dark matter.

"It appears I must cut this conversation short, my dear." The Earl bowed low as Ulquiorra appeared next to him. "I do hope you agree to my proposal soon. I would hate to resort to more drastic actions."

He opened his umbrella and a strange wind dragged him up into the sky toward Sasuke and Nagato, the Arrancar following closely behind. Ignoring them, Hinata sprinted in Naruto's direction, training her eyes back to him so she could count the lapse between heartbeats - five seconds, twelve seconds, thirty… there wasn't another.

Tears dribbled out of the corners of her eyes. Her legs gave out as the energy - the light within him - dimmed and stopped fueling his vital systems. She wanted to get back up, to race to him, but she knew the reality. The signs within his body demonstrated a cor- a recently deceased body. Right this second, on a hospital table assisted by the best medical-nin, only Tsunade-sensei may have been able to bring back someone in his condition.

Tsunade-sensei was gone.

And I'm three minutes away.

God, is this how he felt? Seeing her dying and knowing he couldn't do anything about it? Was this cold weight why he had become so terrified of putting them in danger?

She bit her trembling lip until the metallic taste of blood flooded into her mouth. No! Not here, not now, she wouldn't cry. The Earl was after Nagato and the Amekage was outnumbered. The why didn't matter right now. They came here to protect everyone. She forced Naruto to do this against his fears, and now, it fell to her to continue.

Her lungs cramped as she fought to keep her sobs hidden.

He always drove forward when his heart was killing him. As his partner, she would not accept any less from herself.

I won't fail him by giving up when I'm needed. Crying will wait until after this is over.

Forcing herself to stand, her eyes narrowed into a glare as she faced the tower. Reiryoku surged to her feet, splintering the ground and bolstering her jump to the point she cleared the first building.

I will stop them, Naruto-kun. I'm sorry.

Shino kept his hands in his pockets as he walked across the water's surface and stopped in front of the towering man-beast attacking the waning barrier.

"Excuse me, but I must ask you to stop what you are doing."

The giant paused and glanced down like he spotted Shino for the first time.

"What?"

"I asked you to stop what you are doing."

"And why's that?"

"Because, I have questions for you. For instance, do you remember killing a man and dog during your attack on Konoha?"

The man's fist crashed into the lake, the blow creating a towering geyser.

"I killed a lot of people that day." He gave a booming laugh. "And now I can add one more."

"That is unfortunate." Shino stood on Yammy's massive shoulder unfazed. "I had hoped you would not need an explanation for why I am going to kill you."

"Kill me, Yammy, the strongest of the Espada? Trash like you probably can't even withst-"

Shino stepped up to the side of his face and punched the behemoth so hard it snapped his head to the side.

"I do not believe you are the strongest." Shino delivered another punch to the same spot. "True strength requires a balance of capabilities. How does this not apply to you? You merely possess strength and durability, making you an easy target to pick apart."

"Say all that after you manage to hurt-"

Yammy shouted out as a purpled bruise grew over his face and up to his eye. He slapped it away with his hand, only for the mass of purple to expand onto his fingers. Shino landed softly on the water as the nano-sized venomous insects ate away at the Hierro and infested the less fortified skin beneath.

Yammy's reiatsu exploded in a violent torrent of red energy, dissolving the insects in its potency and sending Shino flying back. The bug-user struggled to find his footing as his hive buzzed frantically within his body. He suspected the Espada was capable of such a torrential outpouring of power. It'd melted the exposed skin on his hands and patches from his face, exposing the interlocked armor type bugs underneath. The healing type went to work, secreting a healing fluid over the wounds and accelerating his body's repair.

These Arrancar were truly frightening, but as noted by Hinata, extremely predictable.

Another punch rushed at his kneeling form with the force of a meteor.

"Kiba and Akamaru were their names." The punch froze in mid-air a few feet from Shino's unflinching body. "Despite their reckless behavior, they had become powerful enough to give you those faint scars on your chest, while limited by the lack of spiritual power. How did I know it was you? Because, my Kikaichu recognized your reiatsu."

"What - did you - ah!" Yammy clutched at his paralyzed arm with his good hand as he struggled to move it. "You trash."

"It is poor to explain your skills to an enemy." Shino stood and walked around the fist so he could gaze directly up at the Arrancar. "However, given your inability to move that limb, I would say they have moved into your joints."

"They?"

Boil like bulges formed under the skin on Yammy's arm and a horde of gigantic demonic insects burst out and continued to consume flesh and reiryoku.

"My Kidaichu feed on flesh and energy. By raising your power, you accelerated their growth, and your size provided plenty of feed. It is a recent addition to my colonies and was one of the more difficult types to fully tame."

Yammy ripped off his arm and flung it away. He roared as his reiatsu climbed higher and he transformed. The extra legs disappeared and the bone of his jaw expanded to encase his entire head in a helmet of white. His body shifted and became more ape like as his power continued to climb.

"You made the mistake of pissing me off. When my rage gets to this point, my strength reaches an entirely new level!"

"And you made the mistake of not learning the first time."

Blood began to leak out of Yammy's mouth and eyes. The giant clutched his head in his hands and screamed, tearing chunks out of his mask and face. Shino placed his hands in his pockets and walked back to the city as more crimson leaked from the gigantic Espada's ear and he fell under the lake.

"I did not fight you purely to settle my grudge with you. I also chose to come here as the one best suited to facing you."

The giant's mouth took in so much air, his regular Kikaichu would have been no more than dust. It allowed them to easily carry his explosive-type into the Arrancar's body where the ravenous type had already devoured a path into the skull. It only took time for the leeches to convert enough blood into crystal shrapnel, which exploded and shredded the Espada's brain to ribbons.

Author's Notes:

Writing Shikamaru fights has always been a long but intensive process. Because he thinks five turns ahead, I have to do the same and make sure to lay the groundwork (and drop subtle clues in the writing) for his victory. Otherwise, it looks like its handed to him just because.

Shino was fun as always.

The balancing of tactics vs raw power has been a fun challenge. I find it is actually the ninja's like the aforementioned two that are actually the more overpowered characters, simply because they are so devastating strategically and the Espada literally hand them the keys to their defeat. Trying to write some degree of tension into the fights, without handicapping characters, was difficult at points. Overall though, I am very happy with how they turned out.

I am very grateful that Naruto's breakdown was well received by largely everyone (the others were more concerned than anything). Of course, this brought on the issue of providing believable steps to his recovery. I hope that occurred in this chapter. My thinking from the beginning that he had to reach a point where it got to be too much. He had to hit that point hard so he could truly start from scratch and discover how he wanted to proceed. All of Asunder was about enforcing the concept of sacrifice and Naruto having to do more of that. Rend started on the heels of that, but without the friends and village that made him willing to do it. I know many readers hoped it would be Hinata to bring him out of it. While Hinata is the most important aspect, the base for which everything else

depended on, his epiphany/resolution needed to stem from interacting with all the major figures of his life. Essentially, by retreading his steps, being reminded of himself and others, and seeing the good his actions made, it allowed him to honestly move forward. At least, that's what I hoped to convey to you as the reader.

I believe that is everything. I hope everyone has a Merry Christmas, Hanukkah, or whatever you do or don't celebrate. I'm going to keep updating regularly so don't worry about having to wait longer than usual.

See you next week.

Surface

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 21

Naruto folded his hands behind his head and shrugged as the Kyubi growled, pacing back and forth along the cage's bars. Kyo sported a similar, although more human, grimace. He understood why they were upset. It sucked, dying by drowning instead of in a fight or peacefully during sleep. He got it. It pissed him off that he finally got straightened around and wouldn't have the chance to make it up to everyone. But the alternative to dying wasn't an option.

"You little fool. I can still get us out of this." Kyubi glanced over at Kyo. "You don't want to die a pointless death either, samurai. Let me out!"

"Don't, Kyo. Wait until the last possible second and then release yourself from the zanpakuto. I'm finishing the fox for good. No reason you have to meet the same fate as us."

"You're still on this kick?"

"The fox made this choice. I let him out and it will take time to get him back under control, if you can at all. I'm not risking him going berserk so close to everyone."

"Yet you were willing to if I agreed? I could have lied about cooperating and attempted to take over at any time."

"You think I was going to take your word for it?" Naruto shook his head and let his arms fall back down. "Kyo would have created a modified seal to protect me. By instantly cutting your power off, it'd

be easier for him to put you back in the cage if you got out of hand. That would have taken your cooperation, since we would have needed to use your own energy to make the failsafe strong enough. We couldn't siphon your power without you willing giving it. Even if you've changed your mind, we don't have time to construct something like that now. Face it, Kyubi. You made your choice and this is the result."

The Kyubi's eyes remained locked onto his in an unreadable gaze.

"Naruto, I thought after talking to your teachers you'd gained some of your guts back." Kyo clenched his fists. "Are you really okay with this?"

"No, I'm really not. Even though I know how things would ultimately end up, I didn't want to leave Earl and Aizen for the others to face alone. Hell, I might have even gotten a few years pursuing my new dream with Hinata."

"Then, why?"

Naruto pointed directly at the demon. His eyes shown with a quiet determination as his face fell into a pure calm.

"I won't let the fox take another single life. I saw what a fraction of his power did to Konoha. Throwing a fully powered demon onto the pile of existing threats; can you imagine that kind of damage?" Naruto patted the spot on his stomach where the seal used to be. "And I know my friends, they'll do the same thing as what happened with Jashin and try to bring me back. They won't believe that this time the possession is permanent. They won't try and kill me. And when I put all that together, I realized something very clearly." Naruto gripped the spot stared hard at the fox. "You are the greatest threat, Kyubi."

The look that spread over the demon's face could have passed for shock. It kind of surprised him actually. Anger, an arrogant sneer, a biting reply, those were at the top of the list, but shock, not at all. Probably, the fact he wasn't bluffing had finally sunk into that furry

skull. After cheating death multiple times, the fox was realizing this was it.

Naruto would laugh if he wasn't raging.

It had taken the support of so many people to finally feel normal again. Gaara reminded him of his beliefs. Hinata forgave his weakness and showered him with unceasing compassion and gentle strength. Iruka and Kakashi-sensei's words of confidence and helping him understand he wasn't alone. Even finally coming up with a way to speak honestly with his parents, to feel something about them, it was like a spark had re-lit inside him. He wanted to fight.

Everyone rebuilt him and he bit it the first fight out. Well, technically the deer of nightmares was his second fight, or did it count as a continuation since those three summoned it?

Does it really matter?

"I've had enough of this." Kyubi climbed to his feet.

"Fox."

"No, Kyo, we've done this your way. It hasn't worked."

The fox swiped with his paw and the cage dispersed into ether. Naruto's face scrunched up in confusion as the beast stalked over and the samurai placed his face in his hand with a groan.

"What the heck-"

"When did you become afraid of me, Naruto Uzumaki?" Kyubi peered down close enough its hot breath blew back the blonde hair on his head. "When did you become afraid of a stronger opponent or losing someone you wished to protect? When did you become afraid of hope?"

Naruto's mouth hung open as the fox settled lower.

"Answer me!" The fox slammed his paw down next to the ninja, shaking the mindscape and knocking him out of his stupor.

"I'm not afraid, Kyubi. I accepted that some things can't change. If I can't defeat you, all I can do to protect everyone is this."

"You. Gave. Up." Anger radiated off every hair on the fox's body. "You lost and you gave up!"

"I-"

"You betrayed my faith in you! You, who I never liked, who I never stopped thinking of ways to escape and consume, gained my respect. Locked away in that infernal statue, I called out to you and no one else. On the eve of what should have been a hopeless battle against Madara, I put faith in your ability to overcome the impossible. And you have rewarded that honor with fear and defeatism."

Naruto swallowed the dryness in his mouth as his mind slowly started to work again. He'd been ridiculed by the fox plenty of times in the past. He'd been mocked a bunch too. Being chastised, that was new. Sure, he'd berated himself for missing something, but he continued to jump in battle after battle and do what was necessary. He was still in the fight even at his worst - he just had come to terms that there were limits. At least, it felt that way, or more accurately, he told himself that. He never really did believe it though deep down. Did he? To be told he gave up, as much as he wanted to argue, those sharp words were uncomfortably spot on. Having only physically committed up until now, that really was the only way to look at it wasn't it?

He just hadn't wanted to admit it.

"You're right, Kyubi." Naruto scratched the back of his head. "With everything that happened in the past, I thought I was realizing my limitations and accepting reality. I convinced myself each time I fell short of a goal or failed to save someone that it came with being a

ninja. I truly believed I'd matured. I hated it, but I believed it - and I was wrong."

"I don't want your apologies. I want your resolve." The Kyubi's tails thrashed in the air as its reiatsu climbed. "I want your drive to win, your unwavering heart. I want the man I chose to inherit my power. Is that you, boy? Will your blinding spirit inspire me to stand beside you and combine our power to reach a level higher than it has ever been? Will you once again convince me to place my faith in you?"

Naruto saw nothing but pure intensity and sincerity in the foxes gaze. This beast, the King of all Biju and the embodiment of malevolence, cared only about power and honor. Despite that, Kyubi respected him enough to offer another chance. As the demonic reiatsu whipped around him in all its malicious glory, a lifetime of challenges and impossible victories rushed past his mind's eye. Each one strengthened the decision he made in front of Iruka and Kakashi. He had already decided to fight with everything he had. He had sworn he would defeat the threats. Now, now he understood the need to go beyond that. Winning wasn't enough. He needed to save every single soul.

"Yes."

"Do not speak to me with quiet determination! Shout your will to me!"

"Yes."

"Louder, Naruto Uzumaki!"

"I'll do it, you damn fox! I won't give up anymore! You have my word."

"And do you go back on your word?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I am Naruto Uzumaki and that is my nindo!" Naruto jammed his fist into the air. "Now, give me all of your reiryoku!"

It shook him free of the genjutsu almost faster than he recognized he'd been ensnared. Kurenai had gone completely white and fear radiated off of her as she stared into the rumbling horizon.

What is that reiatsu?

It felt dense, almost burning, but without heat. The sky darkened over the source as a red glow emanated out of sight beyond the city walls. Something about it felt familiar, not comforting, but not frightening. It had a harsh taint to it, unrelentingly ferocious without feeling threatening.

"It can't be." Kurenai's voice came out raspy. "Not now."

He'd felt it like this only once before, the naturally rough power tempered with a more soothing one. It'd been awe-inspiring at that time and it was equally impressive now. To freely control that much power, how could anyone not be corrupted by it?

"No." Iruka tried to hide his trembling as the gathered children's eyes widened in awe. "Not a third time."

"Relax, Iruka." Kakashi placed a comforting hand on Jiraiya and Tsunade's shoulders. "If you focus on it, you'll realize it feels different than those times."

"It's still th-"

"No, it's not. This is when he's mastered it. This is the power at its maximum like during the final clash with Madara. This is-"

"Naruto!"

Hinata broke out into a shakily giddy smile as a red comet streaked across the sky and landed in front of her. The Shunshin dispelled and the five intricately detailed fox tails swayed behind the glowing energy cloak. The crossed pattern of toad and fox pupils set within irises of gold stared down at her as an elongated tooth poked out of his grinning lips. He closed the distance in a heartbeat and pulled her into a crushing hug, the energy washing over her soothingly and replenishing her reserves.

"My mother is still fighting the one Arrancar and losing. Go back her up and then we'll regroup."

"Where are you going?"

"The Yondaime is in trouble."

He moved away from her, offered another smile, and vanished in a flare of reiryoku.

Minato cracked open his eyes as a powerful reiatsu landed by his feet. His son leaned down and sniffed at the mostly necrotic tissue that once passed for skin. A smile formed, cracking his lips further as fresh blood dibbled down his chin. Good, the lack of rage in his eyes meant Naruto was in full control over that power.

I'm glad I got to see you again, Naruto. I really am sorry for how badly I messed up your life and our family.

"This dark matter crap really is nasty stuff once it gets in your blood." Naruto gripped Minato's chest with a claw. "Yep, this is going to hurt you - a lot."

Kyubi's reiryoku flooded into his body, the deluge of demonic energy filling every cell and tearing the dark matter out. Each molecule in Minato's body screamed out in agony as the malignant substance fought to stay bonded. It couldn't and it bled out from his pores where the Kyubi's cloak destroyed it.

"The fox's energy will heal a lot of the damage the dark matter did, but your body will still need time to recover. You'll probably be out for a few days."

"Na- ru - to."

"I'd forgotten about my final meeting with the fox before Madara, when he gave me his yang chakra. I remembered how I thanked him for being him and you for sealing him inside me because that life made me who I am." Naruto removed his hand and summoned a clone. "I'm done blaming you guys."

Minato opened his mouth to speak. He wanted to reach out, to apologize and say so many words of praise. He wanted to.

He passed out.

Kushina wiped the blood off her face, tossing dirtied hair over her shoulder as she climbed out of the ramen stand the Arrancar sent her crashing into. Yanking the chunk of wood out of her shoulder, she wrapped wind around it and flung the shrapnel like a kunai for the blonde's face.

Harribel knocked it aside with her zanpakuto. Kushina was already after her, unleashing a razor sharp gale that wrapped around the sword and sliced at the woman's hands. The Arrancar dropped her weapon and the redhead attempted to sever her head from the torso. She dodged with a Sonido, caught her sword a moment prior to it hitting the ground, and charged yellow reiryoku in its hollow center.

"Ola Azul."

She stabbed at Kushina, the projectile shooting upward.

"Not this time!"

Reaching out with both arms, she gathered as much wind as her reiryoku allowed and swung her hands in an angle. As if nature itself created it, a colossal tornado took shape and barreled toward the ground. It gobbled up the energy attack and continued to suck in anything not bolted down.

"Cero."

Harribel swung her sword in an arc, a wide yellow beam exploding from its edge, cutting into the twister. It went about a quarter of the way up until the wind overpowered it and continued its descent, albeit slower. The Arrancar went to escape, but Kushina appeared and kicked her back into place.

Kushina backed away and Harribel charged at her with a sudden Sonido. The unexpected speed burst caught the ninja flatfooted and the zanpakuto ran through her stomach and out her back.

"Damn." Kushina coughed up blood. "You caught me."

"Your exhaustion is obvious, and made it readily apparent you've lost your high speed mobility via the wind."

Kushina gave a crimson grin and clutched Harribel's throat.

"Nah, I have enough for one more." She smashed her forehead into the Arrancar's face. "I just need to make sure all my efforts don't go to waste!"

She used another vicious headbutt and Harribel roughly withdrew her blade and prepared for another swing.

Crap.

Hinata appeared from below, flipping onto one hand and kicking the Arrancar into the maelstrom. The younger girl caught Kushina by the waist and zipped out from underneath.

"Nice timing." Kushina chuckled as Hinata set her down. "I probably couldn't have gotten away without losing a few limbs."

The claws faded back into the pendent and Hinata pressed a bare palm against the wound in her stomach. Blue healing energy began to flow, but Kushina caught her hand and lifted it away.

"That attack isn't going to end this. I'll manage to hang on. You worry about her."

Golden reiatsu pierced the wind and blasted the twister apart. Harribel stood in the sky, her sword changed to a body length shark's tooth. The white pants and shirt had changed into an armored skirt and smaller bone top, revealing her sharp face for the first time.

"Reserreccion." Hinata frowned and moved away from Kushina. "I prayed this wouldn't happen within the city."

"La Gota."

Water condensed around the tooth and a sword-sized water bullet shot straight for the Hinata. She leapt over it and sprung off a wall as the raiment took shape. The Espada was visibly fatigued from their fight and her movements were sluggish. Good, Hinata would know she had to press the advantage and not let her opponent control the fight from long range. That water projectile took out an entire building, and if Kushina assumed correctly, that was likely one of the Arrancar's weaker techniques.

Hinata broke out into a violent series of spins and flips as her jump carried her higher. Harribel struggled to block as the rapid flowing strikes kept her backpedalling higher. Clutching the blades edge, Hinata swung in a vertical arc, bringing in her foot down in a skull cracking heel stomp. The Espada plummeted toward the ground as trickles of crimson dripped over her glare. She righted herself as a gigantic column of water emerged from her sword and snaked around her.

"Cascada!"

The surrounding structures crumbled from the displaced air pressure as the torrent surged up and Hinata fell into it.

"Kaiten: Danpen!"

She twisted in a blurring whirl as the reiryoku whips snapped out, forming a razor sharp helix of energy. Cutting down the water like a propeller, Hinata increased the rotation's speed, diving faster until she emerged from the bottom, crashing with all the attack's lacerating fury into the unsuspecting Arrancar.

Harribel sped away before the attack could score a fatal blow. Hinata skidded across the ground in a low crouching spin and used a clawed hand to slow to a stop. Ignoring the groans of protest from her likely battered muscles, her head snapped up with a scowl as the Earl appeared in the sky. Harribel slouched weakly beside him, her arms failing to staunch the many wounds over her body.

Kushina scowled and struggled to sit up against the pain.

This isn't good. Hinata can't handle both alone.

"Do not fret, my dear Hinata." The Earl floated gleefully by his umbrella's handle. "We must return home for the time be-"

A streak of glowing red darted by the rotund man, leaving clawed slices along his side. Naruto landed and immediately whirled around. Two bladed orbs spun to life in his hands and he flung them at the hovering enemies.

"Futon: Rasenshuriken!"

They screeched across the air, giving the Earl only the chance for his smile to dim. A large armored hand of manifested reiryoku swept in front of them, folding under the damage but ultimately withstanding the projectiles.

A Garganta opened behind them and the manifestation carried them all inside before it sealed shut.

"So he's going to keep being a pain in the ass." Naruto shook his head. "Damn it, Sasuke."

"Naruto, they were after Nagato."

"Yeah, I felt it." Kushina saw him glance down at her. "Is she okay enough to move or do you need to heal her first?"

"It would be best to heal her."

The conversation became fuzzy as Kushina's vision swam. She'd survive. It might take a few nights in the accursed hospital, but she'd come out okay. Her sight cleared enough she could see him dismiss the energy around him and his natural sky blue eyes returned.

They look so much brighter now.

"I'm sorry." Her voice came out in broken whispers. "I'm sorry, Narut-
"

Hinata placed a comforting hand on her forehead, easing relaxing energy into her so consciousness slipped away.

Aizen watched intently from the entrance as Ulquiorra hoisted their final component into the altar and bound him so his hands hung overhead. Such odd ringed eyes that man possessed. To think, simple optical organs carried the ability to cross the barrier between life and death. Where time not of the essence, he may have properly studied them. Such inquisitiveness was unbecoming of him however. He finally gathered both pillars for the altar, and with it, his ascension could begin.

"Where has our friend, the Earl, run off to?

"He left to the lower levels, Aizen-sama." Ulquiorra stepped away. "He claimed it was time to begin preparations for that other artifact he showed you."

"Understandable." Aizen turned around to face the sullen girl quietly watching from the corner. "Orihime, come here."

The girl walked over slowly. She likely understood what was about to happen. The spare opening on the altar's opposite side and his constant reference to her unique power, she would be a complete fool not to realize her fate.

"I had truly wished for you to remain my guest." Aizen took her hand and began to guide her to the pedestal that would bind her for eternity. "I have greatly enjoyed your company - more so than I ever expected."

"May I ask a question?"

"Certainly."

"Why?" He stared directly into her unshaken gaze. "Why do you wish to bring so much harm to everyone?"

"I do not wish to harm others. It is merely a consequence of building things anew." She didn't resist as he helped her step up into her permanent spot. "The worlds have been flawed since their inception. There is no god to dry every tear and settle every conflict. The creator of this universe has long since abandoned it to the delicate balance of human, soul, and hollow. I will usher in a new universe, with new worlds and be a true god to all creation. There will be misery as this iteration passes, but it will allow for a far better one to take its place."

Ulquiorra shackled her arms overhead and chained her feet to the pedestal as he did with Nagato.

"Do you really need to make a better world instead of improving this one?"

"Yes, because as the Earl said, these worlds cannot be saved."

He activated the Hogyoku in his chest. The center of the altar, filled with dark matter, began to shine brilliantly blue. Starting at the toes, stone replaced Orihime's flesh as well as their other guests. She bit at her lip to hide her fear as the transmutation climbed higher until it reached her neck.

"I don't believe you."

The stone sealed away her voice.

"You should, Orihime." His words came out softly as he tenderly cupped the new statue's face. "I was born different in this world in order to see its flaws. It only makes sense I use my superiority to make things better." A bitter smile etched itself on his face. "For what other reason would I emerge into life so powerful, my mother immediately perished from merely being in the presence of my reiatsu?"

Momo Hinamori's spell relayed Aizen's plan to dispatch a few improved Arrancar in order to prod a response from Seireitei. An advanced interception party had been sent out to Rukongai earlier in the day. They wanted to test the enemy's strength and prevent any civilian casualties.

The survivors started coming in shortly after midnight.

Twenty members, each ranked from third to eighth seat, slowly dragged themselves into the safe haven of Seireitei. All of them survived. Yet, none of them returned unharmed. It would likely be a day under intensive care until they could fight again. All in all, it was a solid victory.

Then, they explained the enemy force. They went into great detail about all five Arrancar.

"Four to one." Gaara leaned against the wall as the other captains lounged around the Commander's office. "I wonder if that is due to limited number of troops on Aizen's part or it is simply him boasting."

"It makes little difference." Byakuya did not open his eyes as he sat with his chin tilted down. "The fact remains that such a ratio should not exist in the first place."

"Having officers with higher seats would balance that equation out a bit more." Mayuri stroked the metal trinket jutting out of his chin. "Including other variables, we can roughly anticipate we do not have the numbers to effectively combat four different fronts with this quality of Arrancar. Strategically, it may be better to start calculating which battlefield can be abandoned to strengthen the others."

"That leads to a significant amount of deaths."

"That is war, boy."

"I have been in war." Gaara focused his teal eyes on the scientist. "It is never a simple matter of statistical planning."

"Nonsense. While exact quantization is impossible, taking into account aspects such as the balance of souls between the human world and Soul Society, alongside potential increases in hollow strength, would allow us to select necessary sacrifices."

"Deserting a battlefield, sacrifices?" Byakuya stood. "The pride of the Gotei 13 should not be stained with such suggestions."

"Got to agree with the pretty boy." Zaraki's bells jingled as he leaned forward in his chair. "I say you let me and the entire Eleventh Division handle Rukongai. Most of us hail from that neck of the woods and we'd love a good fight."

"You couldn't cover the entirety of Rukongai alone." Gaara glanced over at the aged Commander staring off his balcony at the city. "At least one other division would be needed preferably two."

"We can handle it."

"It is not your fighting prowess I refer to. It is a basic issue of distance."

"And how many do you propose we spare for the fodder in the slums?" Mayuri poked at his ear with his little finger. "And what of the Fourth Division? There are only so many medics available."

Gaara spotted everyone's attention shifting to him. Even Yamamoto had cracked an eye and discreetly peered over at him. Being in the spotlight was the last thing he wanted. While he would voice his opinions, taking the conversation's lead was an entirely different matter.

I've overstepped my bounds again. As the newest captain I should be remaining largely silent. Those two weeks around Naruto really imbued me with some bad habits.

He pushed his concerns aside. The others were unaware of the strategic value of his side project. Small as it may be, the teams who stuck with his training were making progress. With another week, they likely could handle these Arrancar without injury.

"I agree the Eleventh Division should be our primary force in Rukongai. Leave the First, Second, and Ninth Divisions in Seireitei to defend it. As for the rest of the Gotei 13, divide them between here and Rukongai. Kurosaki's friends, including Rukia Kuchiki, myself, and a small task force of captains and lieutenants will protect Karakura Town."

He remained deadpan even as his nerves made him slightly uncomfortable under their incredulous looks.

"What leads you to believe the human world army will be less substantial than here." Mayuri grinned like a cat who caught a mouse. "Or is this the misstep of the young?"

"The residents of Rukongai, being spiritual in nature, have higher reiryoku than the living. It would be a mistake to assume regular hollows won't be drawn to the bloodshed and feed. It would be better to fail in the human world if failure is to occur at all. More than that, Karakura Town is in an isolated space. My sand should be able to cover the entire area, reducing the need for more Shinigami."

"This is only a temporary solution. Until Aizen and this Earl are dead, we will be locked in a never ending war." Byakuya stood and shifted his scarf over his shoulder. "Our primary focus should be on dealing with them."

"Ichigo Kurosaki and the others will deal with the orchestrators of this plot." Yamamoto moved away from the balcony and headed for the exit. "I shall select the squad accompanying Gaara no Suna. You are all dismissed."

Yamamoto stepped into the quiet room of the Fourth Division's recovery ward. Sado Yasutora and Rukia Kuchiki slept soundly under the patchwork of fresh bandages. He despised seeing children bedridden. No, calling those who traversed Hell successfully children was an insult. They were young warriors, and while it grated on his spirit to see them injured, they should hold their heads high.

He had been a fool, underestimating Aizen. Knowing the traitor fled to Hueco Mundo, he should have personally marched into the endless desert and melted its sand to glass until the whelp burned away to ash. Instead, he waited and allowed him to found an army.

He did not start preparing for the Earl of Millennium's arrival when Gaara first proved one of the special zanpakuto belonged to him.

I cannot lose myself in regret. I must do everything in my power to ensure victory.

Contacting the Royal Guard was the first step. While they were largely unconcerned about what happened in Seireitei, rightly judging only the Soul King's safety truly mattered, the Earl and Aizen threatened the grand monarch as well. He had been denied an audience. However, upon mention of the Millennium Earl, he was ordered to continue preparations as necessary. The Soul King would be made aware and get back to him if deemed necessary.

Continue as necessary. If that is all the support we shall receive, then we shall have to call upon all our allies, including those I doubted in the past.

Nel cuddled up tightly to the slumbering sword as they both snored softly. He sat down on the edge of her bed and let his head hang, enjoying the solitude of the moon highlighting the room. He waited patiently as the minutes ticked by until the little Arrancar stirred and rolled over to face him.

"I need your help, Nel Tu."

"Kay." She yawned and rubbed at her eyes. "Do I need to become super fusion Nelmehada?"

Aizen flicked the blood from his blade as the last of the Visored collapsed. His old captain's head rolled across the floor and tumbled over the edge of the warehouse stairs, making a thump every time it bounced onto a new step.

I never imagined the results would be so spectacular.

On a whim, he decided to sample the altar's capabilities. By directing it with the Hogyoku, he multiplied his reiatsu tenfold in a matter of hours and decided to put it to the test. He found the rouge

Shinigami-Hollow hybrids and goaded them into attacking him. Although, provoking people who already hated him wasn't difficult.

Regardless, in mere minutes, he crushed them - exterminated them.

"I really am going to become the next god."

Aizen always remained composed - poised. He wasn't prone to grand expressions or being swept up in a moment of excitement. This time was different.

This time, in the abandoned warehouse littered with corpses, he was laughing.

Naruto raised an eyebrow as the two little ninja blocked the exit with matching glares. Sunk down low with guards up, they looked ready to attack him. Heck, the girl was actually thumbing a kunai tucked under her sleeve. Okay, he pissed them off a little bit… and at least the girl had a similar temperament to him.

"You don't get to leave until you apologize to them." Tsunade growled out as the boy nodded vigorously.

"It wouldn't do any good right now." He put his hands up defensively as she unsheathed the kunai and threatened him with it. "They're unconscious, unconscious!"

"Then, you can wait for them to wake up!"

"That could be days."

"Doesn't matter." The boy spoke up for the first time. "It's important"

How can I be related to anyone that quiet and reserved?

"Fine, I'll leave a clone."

"No, it has to be you. The Bunshin didn't say those things to them."

"Kid, I admit I was out of line. I lost my cool and said things in ways that I shouldn't have. But, there is a lot of stuff you're too young to understand going on."

The twins shared a glance between them and the girl lunged, trying to stab him in the face.

"What's there to understand you big dumb idiot!"

He lazily caught her wrist as Jiraiya calmly closed in, unnoticeably so, and punched him square in the groin. The eldest sibling collapsed into the fetal position on the ground with a silent scream.

"Mission accomplished."

The twins grabbed his jacket and began to drag him down the hall as he cradled his wounded pride.

Naruto Uzumaki, one of the most powerful ninja in the world, and I get taken out by two kids and a dick punch.

"Mom cries a lot and tries to hide it by chopping up onions." Jiraiya mumbled as they dragged him around the corner.

"Dad gets really quiet when people talk about all the things you've done." Tsunade pocketed the dagger. "They always look sad when people ask questions about you and they can't answer."

Naruto straightened out, but let them continue dragging them. They weren't telling him anything he hadn't already suspected. With all the times his parents tried to reach out in his past life, of course they would feel regret. Honestly, accusing them otherwise made him feel the guiltiest. He knew they were excellent ninja protecting everyone. He knew they were good people.

"Seriously guys, I'll apologize if you want, but I have to get going."

"Why?" Tsunade stopped as her face scrunched up and tears threatened to fall. "Why are you doing everything you can to not be a

part of our family? You're our brother aren't you?"

"You don't have to worry about them being mad at you for blowing up." Jiraiya's gripped tightened on the collar. "They already said it was their fault, and Tsunade does it lots of times and they still keep her around."

"Do you really hate all of us?"

Naruto sighed and climbed to his feet. Figures, they see a mega temper tantrum and the parents are put out of commission, leaving him to deal with two confused kids. They expected everything could be fixed with an apology and a few hugs. They honestly believed family was that simple.

He envied them for that.

"Those are a lot of questions, and maybe someday, I'll be able to sit down with you guys and answer them. Right now, you're going to have to deal with knowing that I don't hate you, I'm sorry for how I handled things, and I will apologize to them right now."

"That's-"

Jiraiya moved in front of her and nodded at the door on their right.

"Mom and Dad are in there."

"Jiraiya, he didn't-"

"They believe in him so we will too."

Tsunade crossed her arms, stuck out her bottom lip into a pout, and looked away.

Okay, her, I can see as my sister.

He shut the door behind him. Minato and Kushina's beds were positioned parallel to each other. They slumbered easily, the

bandages and paper seals keeping them comfortable enough to rest.

"Those two kids are really impressive. Hardheaded too, wouldn't let me leave even though I already checked in to see if you would be alright. Still, from what Iruka and Kakashi-sensei told me, they have good hearts and scary skills. You've done a great job with them." He inhaled softly. "I know - I know you would have done the same with me if you could have."

He still wasn't sure if he wanted to attempt being a part of their lives and them in his. It may not be an option to begin with. However, not moving forward wasn't the same as forgiving them. That was what it really came down to - forgiving them or holding a grudge.

"There are so many things you could have done better, but I can't keep focusing on that. It makes me into someone I'm not. So I forgive you guys for everything that needs to be forgiven. Whether I choose to see you again, whether I can, I want to say I accept your apologies. I also won't let you feel guilty anymore about doing what you needed to as ninja."

Naruto reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a tarnished headband. The silken cloth was new, but the tarnished plate peppered in thin scratches and divots was the original. Kakashi-sensei had given it to him after the meal. Somehow, it survived the tower's destruction and Kiba found it in the rubble. Giving it to his parents would have been too much, so the jonin had kept it in their stead.

"I turned out alright, and you saved a lot of lives doing what you did. After being forced to put my loved ones at risk, I understand a little bit better what you must have felt." He tied the headband around his forehead and tightened it so it fit snug. "I won't run away from that anymore."

He went over to the window and opened it enough he could hop onto the sill.

"I- no, my team - we're going to make sure everything is okay. We'll handle the burden so you make sure everyone keeps smiling."

He leapt out into the night, the long black bands whipping behind his head as the wind danced around him. Landing softly, he went to walk away when an exaggerated gasp made him turn around.

Iruka smiled at him as a young boy wildly flapped his arms with eyes nearly bulging out of his head.

"It- it- it's you! Na- nar- nar."

He inhaled another ridiculous gasp and passed out. Iruka caught him with a chuckle and tossed him over his shoulder.

"Told ya he idolized you."

"You weren't kidding about his excitableness either." Naruto waved and started to leave. "Take care, Iruka-sensei."

"Where are you going?"

"After the bastards giving everyone trouble."

"And how are we supposed to do that, idiot-sensei?" Ichigo landed behind him. "Unless you can summon a Garganta with that crazy new power of yours."

"Jealous that I now have almost as much raw energy as you?"

"Ha, maybe while I'm sleeping."

"Someone's gotten confident."

"I survived that lady's training." Ichigo took a defiant stance and pointed directly at the blonde. "You have nothing that can intimidate me!"

"I can step up the training from kid mode, you know."

"What kid mode?" Ichigo spoke low as he leaned in with a psychotic glare. "You making crap up, Naruto?"

"What's the matter, Ichigo?" Naruto's feral grin stretched from ear to ear. "Don't like the fact I've been taking it easy on you?"

"I'll handle whatever you can throw at me!"

"Such youthful vigor, Ichigo-kun." Lee pulled the carrot top away. Come! Shout out your burning will along with me. Yosh!"

"Ichigo." Naruto gave a warning look. "Don't you dare."

The Substitute's smirk became wicked.

"Yosh."

"Louder, Ichigo-kun! Yosh!"

"Yosh!"

"I swear to God, if you start wearing a spandex jumpsuit!"

"Yosh!"

"Are you three going to be this loud the entire trip?" Shikamaru rubbed the back of his neck as he walked up the street.

"I think Ichigo-kun is releasing the stress brought on by Kurenai-sensei's genjutsu training." Hinata came up behind Naruto and stopped near him. "It can make you… unhinged for a little while."

"And what do you mean the entire trip?" Naruto faced the Kage as Lee and Ichigo began racing up the street. "I know you're not coming with us."

"Then like most of your answers in the Academy, you'd be wrong."

"You have a village to lead."

"Konan will keep everything going until Yondaime wakes up. This is big enough you need all hands on deck. Besides, like I told Hinata before, this isn't all on you three this time."

"Agreed." Shino materialized out of the alley. "I have missed enough battles. Unless, you mean to leave me out, Naruto?"

"I-"

Shino closed the distance instantly and leaned in.

"Naruto, friends should not hesitate to work with one another. You do consider us friends, yes?"

"Of course-"

"Then, we shall be accompanying you."

Naruto rolled his eyes and smiled as he folded his hands behind his head.

"Well, I suppose it will be nice to have Baa-chan's ultimate team assembled for a major mission."

"The Godaime's team plus Ichigo." Shino tugged the collar of his coat up higher. "You really must work on not excluding others, Naruto."

"I was including him."

"He cannot be a part of the ultimate team, as the Godaime did not select him for it - including him creates a new ultimate team."

Naruto snorted in amusement.

"I figured getting laid would have mellowed you out more."

"Your student - I really can't wrap my head around that - did have a valid question." Shikamaru stifled a yawn. "How are we supposed to

make it back to the other side?"

"You plan on going back through Hell." Hinata's flat tone conveyed the same enthusiasm Naruto felt. "Since Sasuke is already back, the Akatsuki have likely recovered - and Jashin."

"Trust me. I would love a better suggestion." The blonde shrugged as Lee and Ichigo dropped into pushups on the far end of the street. "We can't stay here, letting Pain's barrier weaken as more hollow flow into this world. I doubt the Earl and Espada will be back since they left after grabbing the Rinnegan. And while, I'm guessing they'll be reserved for the Shinigami, it still doesn't mean those other Arrancar won't show up. We can't win a battle of endurance."

"Attrition." Shikamaru said.

"Whatever. The point is, their final plan is ready to go and we just sit here and deal with small fry. The tracker Ichigo has opened a portal to here so it probably can do the same the other way. It sucks, but it's our only route back."

Shikamaru cupped his hands in his thinking pose as Lee's and Ichigo's shouts echoed from deeper within the city. Naruto glanced over to where Iruka and his kid had been. When had they left?

"I concur with, Naruto. Why? Because it is our only option." The street lamps reflected off Shino's sunglasses. "Hinata explained the danger of Ichigo transforming was diminished, and Naruto is the same, because he now has control over Kyubi's power."

"Travelling to such a place will not be necessary."

The group spun around and Naruto growled as his eyes shifted to red.

"Jashin!"

"I am not he. Although, I feel I must apologize for my brother's actions."

Naruto blinked in confusion, the red returning to blue as Hinata gasped.

"You're the Rikudo Sennin."

Naruto tilted his head to the side as he studied the man. Yeah, he didn't look exactly like the other creep. The face was more angular and his reiatsu felt way too gentle. Hinata had told him all about Jashin's claims. Who'd have thought the bastard actually told the truth.

"I found this little one and her friend ready to enter Hell after picking up your trail. It would have been terrible for her to wander in such a place."

Nel poked her head out from behind his legs and Samehada did the same directly above her. She hopped to the side and reached out with a hand.

"Come with me if you want to fight the bad guys."

"Sennin-sama, what are you doing here?"

The older man smiled warmly at Hinata and sat on the air itself.

"As my friend, Gamamaru foretold, the time has come for me to use the last of my power."

"I always wondered how old the Great Toad Sage was." Naruto scratched at his chin with a single finger. "Didn't think he was that old."

"He converses with the savior of the world like they're relatives at lunch." Shikamaru shook his head. "I'm trying to wrap my head around it and he's completely unfazed."

"They are both saviors of the world." Shino kept his hands pocketed. "And it is like Naruto to lack astonishment in these situations."

"And reverence."

"I can hear you guys."

"They are not wrong, Naruto-kun."

"Is no one taking me up on fighting bad guys?" Her still outstretched hand clasped and unclasped. "I spent five whole minutes coming up with such a cool line!"

"Gi!"

The Sennin laughed as everyone bantered amongst each other.

"It is heartening to see all of you so full of cheer in spite of the dire situation. Placing my hope in you truly was the correct choice."

Naruto bit back a sarcastic retort to Shino as the Sage's words sunk in. His brow furrowed in a perplexed expression and the ancient man nodded as if recognizing the unspoken question. The blonde felt a pocket of air scoop him up like a chair as the same happened to the others.

"I am sure all of you have heard portions of my history, as I am sure you have many questions. Please, allow me to explain the story in its entirety, in a place where we will not draw as much attention."

Author's Notes:

Sorry for being a few hours late, finally got around to playing Telltale's Walking Dead Season 1 and watching DC's Young Justice… time slipped away from me.

Anyway, this chapter, while it was written to life easily, had a lot of weight/importance on it. Obviously, Naruto's resolution needed to

have a high degree of potency or else the previous internal struggles would have been needless, but more than that, it needed to happen without him suddenly switching gears. My goal, was to show him almost back to normal with the last chapter, but then have the Kyubi push him to that final step. So, in many ways Naruto came full circle, but with a maturity and true commitment that he never had before. It stopped being something that he did, and became something that he was.

Sculpting the fox's dialogue also took some tweaking. I didn't want to compromise the way he'd developed throughout Asunder and Rend (i.e suddenly making them friends and turning the Biju into this compassionate creature). I strove to keep the fox as the intimidating demon he was, one that values power and honor, and use that to both team them up and complete Naruto's growth.

The Vizored were something that I went back and forth on. At first, I wasn't going to include them at all. Then, it was going to be an obligatory cameo or section. However, I ultimately decided their most impacting purpose would be to demonstrate just how omnipotent and different this story's Aizen is in comparison to the cannon (aside from the lack of butterfly wings). And, indirectly, also show where Ichigo stands as well. I hated doing it in such a dispassionate way, but inserting the battle scene significantly lessened the potency of their deaths. This way was sudden, harsh, and awful… all the things death bestows. It gave the scene (in my opinion) so much more gravity.

As for Orihime, I'm not ready to talk about her yet.

Hope everyone has a Happy New Year

I'll see you next week.

Monsters

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Naruto Rend

Chapter 22

The world faded away and suddenly all of them sat within the worn battlefield of Naruto's mindscape. Lee and Ichigo showed the most visible confusion, where as the rest of his team remained unfazed. He caught a glimpse of Kyo standing beside of group of strangers. They seemed to know each other at least. Gaara stepped up beside him with a subdued agitation. Naruto's questions died on his lips as Kyubi stalked up and crouched down next to the Sennin.

"So it's time then." The fox tipped his nose close and the Sage rested a hand on it. "It is good to see you again."

"I am glad to see your anger has dissipated further and am proud you chose to return to Naruto, Kurama."

File that one away for later.

"Can someone please explain where we are?" Gaara folded his arms over his chest and leaned back in the invisible chair. "How are we here?"

Naruto glanced over at Kyo standing among his group. They had to be the other spirits. The silver haired guy looked the most innocent when compared to the old man and the tanned regal guy with the facial hair. It hadn't really dawned on him they were all male, which meant one of them was Hinata's. And if they were like Kyo, they had access to all her memories and could see things through her eyes.

Hinata says her spirit is a complete gentleman, so no need to cause a scene.

"Shortly before my death, Gamamaru had a vision of a world embroiled in terrible pain, billions of spirits without form, frightened and suffering in an eternal limbo between life and true death. He warned of a man, warped by torment and hatred, whose power corrupted all life."

"The Earl." Hinata placed her hands on her knees. "He caused the Flood that wiped out almost all of humanity."

"Yes. I used my gifts to move my spirit to that world and give it shape. While I could not restore life from so much death, I managed to create a spiritual world as a bridge between life and true death so that those suffering spirits had an opportunity to find peace and move on. Unfortunately, I lacked the power to restore a natural cycle and this new world became intricately tied to the living world. Thus, a balance came into existence where reincarnation became necessary, else everything would become undone and revert to formless anguished spirits."

"Soul Society and the human world." Gaara closed his eyes in concentration. "Yamamoto-dono explained you created the Shinigami and Seireitei, but the negative souls became hollow instead of moving to Hell."

"I created the endless desert called Hueco Mundo as a place for those sad creatures to reside, providing protection to weaker beings and allowing the Shinigami to purify them over time." The Sennin"s shoulders slumped and Kurama lay down next to him. "I was not God and could only do so much to give everyone a chance at happiness. I wish a better system could have been created. I truly do."

"I assume the Earl didn't like all of this." Shikamaru eyed the fox warily. "I doubt he sat by quietly."

"We engaged in frequent battle. I created the Shinigami as warriors in direct response to him, his family of Noah, and the hollow. Using Banbutsu Sozo to give form on such a large scale whilst clashing with his antithetical power weakened me. Knowing the end was near, and understanding alone the risk the Noah posed to existence, I invaded their Ark and prevented their ability to procreate more of their ilk."

"They could have children, but they would not be Noah?" Shino questioned.

The ancient man nodded slowly.

"The Earl does not, to this day, accept the depths of his power's corruption. It would have darkened the souls of each generation more so than the previous until only evil remained and blotted out existence. He will not admit only he is resistant to dark matter's insidious nature as it is his hate that twisted his original gifts."

"So you recreated the world and made it so the existing Noah could only reincarnate every few generations." The silver-haired guy rubbed at his gloved left hand. "Why?"

"I lacked the power to fully purify them. It resulted in a final battle with the Earl. He perished for a time, almost all of my power left me, its deluded fragments becoming what you referred to as Innocence, and the new generations merged with the reborn souls to repopulate the living world. My closest warriors found me on the verge of death and created the story of the Soul King to protect me from the Earl as I knew he would return."

"The Great Toad Sage gave you more than a single prophesy before you died and went to that world - didn't he?" Naruto asked.

"He prophesied much of what has occurred and requested I erase it from his memories so he did not unravel the course of our world. Entrusted to me alone, I sought those described through the ages. When the barrier between worlds ceased, the Earl acted, removing

evil power from one spirit, but I drew that gentle man and another woman away to safety. I did the same for you four. The ones chosen to bond with these warriors to my left. My only task, using the last of my power, was to bring all of you together and then take those who wish to confront the Earl and his scion to his Ark."

Naruto rubbed his face as his head swam with all the information thrown at them. Being a part of one prophesy was crazy enough, two made him worry there was a third. For a guy who rejected fate, it kind of made it difficult to stick with that outlook. At least the rest of them looked almost as lost or overwhelmed as he did.

"We are already dangerously low on troops." Gaara stood to his full height as the hint of regret flashed behind his stoicism. "I want to go with you, but doing so guarantees we lose Karakura Town."

Ichigo's jaw tightened as a vein ran up his neck. If Naruto remembered right, that was his home. It impressed him Ichigo stayed silent instead of saying he'd go with Gaara. It meant his student was focused on the real threats and recognized he alone stood the best chance against Aizen.

He certainly learns faster than I ever did.

"I am sorry everything must be left to all of you." The Sennin bowed his head respectfully. "For all my deeds, you must bear my shortcomings."

"Don't worry about it." Naruto hopped to his feet and faced the group. "We've kicked every bastard's ass that tried to hurt our home. It doesn't matter if this is bigger. They'll lose."

His friends smiled at him and confidence warmed him.

"Not bad for a guy sobbing like a bitch for the past two days."

"Shut up, Kyo!"

"Make me, weepy!"

"So all these people are living in your guys' heads?" Shikamaru raised an eyebrow.

"My hollow and Zangetsu aren't here, but yeah, it can get crowded at times."

"It seems I am again left out."

"Yosh. Perhaps we can find a companion sprit for you, Shino-kun."

"I want to ride the giant fox!" Nel charged for the giant beast.

"Get away from me you little snot! Tell your sword to stop chewing on my tail!"

Naruto fell silent with a genuine smile as he watched the spirits join in on the banter. How had he allowed his grief to make him so blind to the wonderful friends he'd gained? It felt so stupid now. Although, maybe he needed to drown in the rest like that. Instead of burying it under responsibility and continually ignoring it, he needed to come to terms with everything so now he could honestly stand among everyone with a pure kind of happiness.

Gaara came up next to him and joined him in appraising the assembled group.

"Have you reclaimed what you were missing?"

"Yeah." His eyes lit up as he caught Hinata laughing at Nel. The girl, oblivious to the fox's annoyance, dodged the whipping tails with glee. The demon kept glancing over at the Sennin as if to continually reign in his natural temper in the man's presence. "I've found more."

"I am glad to have you feeling better, my friend."

"Thank you, Gaara, for everything." His smile became cheekier. "And don't worry, I'll take care of the Earl quick to come save you from the

Arrancar."

Gaara gave a short chuckle.

"I believe you are confused as to who will be saving who."

Thank you, Naruto Uzumaki.

"Huh?"

He glanced over at the Sennin who nodded once.

Kurama was the most prideful of my flock and the most hurt by humanity. Because of you, he regained the will to believe in something other than strength and rage. Thank you for saving him and for being a source of light to those seeking hope.

Naruto nodded and turned back to the group.

I owe it to them. Knowing I'm not alone, that we're all fighting with one another this time, it's crazy, but I don't feel desperate or sad like Madara. I know it's going to be the toughest fight in our lives. It's going to be the most dangerous. But, I feel like we're going to win. I feel like… like all of us have a future.

"Gaara-taicho. Gaara. Gaara!"

The flood of putrid reiatsu jolted him out of his stupor before Rangiku's voice reached him. Hundreds of Garganta opened across the blue sky as even more dark matter infused Arrancar poured out with bloodcurdling roars. Hundreds were followed by hundreds more as they rained down in full ferocity. The lack of organization and their powers flared to maximum spoke volumes of their mindset. They had not come to fight. They had come to slaughter.

An inopportune time to have my spirit called away.

"There's so many." A nervous bead of sweat dripped down her jaw line.

He waited as more continued to enter the human world. It had been unfortunate their original plan to move the town to Rukongai was no longer valid with the simultaneous attack on Soul Society. It meant that the sleeping population, huddled away behind a barrier underground, would be more likely to be affected by all the spiritual power saturating everything.

The Garganta closed as thin specks of sunlight filtered through the army obscuring the once serene sky. There were more than he hoped, but not more than they planned.

"Rangiku, signal the first wave."

A red ball of Kido formed in her palm and she flung it up into the air where it cast a glow over the shadowed battlefield. Gaara knelt down and began to focus on the thin layer of sand covering large swaths of the city. A mountain-sized avalanche of ice arced over the rightmost side of the horde, freezing many instantly and catching the stray limbs of the escaping. A colossal specter brandishing an ornate scythe in each rotting hand sailed into the field and spun. It screeched like a buzz saw as it passed amongst the army. The confused Arrancar inspected their shallow cuts. They shouted out as their ethereal spirits seeped out of the scratches, crying as they floated unwillingly into empty blackness under the phantasm's hood.

A massive gravity-well opened beneath the left side of the scrambling army. It pulled them down in a blur, crushing them against the earth as others struggled against the outward drag attempting to capture them.

Now that the enemy is centered.

"Rangiku, signal I've begun the second wave."

She repeated her last action, this time with a green orb.

Gaara lifted his hands, commanding the particles of sand to rise and disappear into the air. The panicked Arrancar, breathing heavily, inhaled the grains and began to violently cough. There wouldn't be enough sand to kill them outright. He was nearing his limit of control without harming himself. Going over that line still wouldn't be able to get all of them, leaving him as a liability. Their bodies were too resilient for the quantity he'd dispersed, but it made more sense to weaken them as a whole, rather than killing a fraction and leaving the rest at peak power.

"Rangiku, signal the third wave and prepare for all out combat."

She summoned two blue orbs and launched them into the air. Three more presences joined the others as Ichigo's friends leapt into the fray. A thousand arrows erupted up from beneath the cityscape, drawing a battalion's worth of monsters into the city - where Rukia and Chad began their assault.

Things are going smoothly. We need to keep the pressure up and keep working in unison-

"So you're the annoyance orchestrating my army's confusion."

The sand-nin glanced behind him. The aged Arrancar slung a heavy looking double bladed battle axe over his broad shoulders as a crown of bone encircled his head. The hair rose on the back of his neck, and out of sheer instinct, Gaara dove forward alongside Rangiku, forming a wall behind him. The axe cleaved it in two with a lazy strike and passed by the multi-story building to the left, demolishing it.

"Baraggan Louisenbairn, I am the second Espada and the leader of this army." More powerful reiatsu exploded around the city. "Those six spiritual pressures are my Fraccion and they will be dealing with the rest of you Shinigami."

"I suppose I should be honored you chose to confront me, considering my fellow captains are more powerful." Gaara waved

Rangiku back.

"My idiot subordinates are too stupid to fight someone with your tactical mind. Besides, this won't take long. I will be dealing with your compatriots quickly enough."

"I'm going to join the others in fighting the army." Rangiku turned to leave. "Be careful."

Gaara removed his dagger, sand exploding out of the gourd and racing for the Espada in a torrent. It suddenly slowed and the stocky Arrancar easily stepped around it. Frowning, Gaara tried again and achieved the same result.

"Every Espada represents a facet of death." Baraggan strode closer. "My ability is the absolute power of aging and thus time. My Senescencia can slow any movement." The Espada appeared behind Gaara and he tapped his shoulder. "And I can accelerate the age of anything, like making your bones old and brittle."

Gaara vanished in a Shunpo and landed on the roof above as flakes of his sand armor fell away. The ex-Kazekage bit back a frown. He'd been right to put that old technique into use. Had he not… this was not an opponent he could fight handicapped.

"You little bastard." Baraggan jammed his axe into the pavement. "You'll regret disrespecting my power."

The Captain stood to his full height and formed the ram hand seal.

"I assume your Resurreccion increases the range of your current ability."

"Yes, and it will rot away your very bones. All things die in the face of age."

"Not quite."

The street cracked and Baraggan immediately sunk waist deep into quicksand. He made a few half-hearted attempts to escape, but instead chose to glare up at the sand-user.

I thought so.

Despite being a high ranking Arrancar, it seemed odd the Espada didn't demonstrate more speed and instead relied on his ability to slow the opponent. The fact he sunk instead of escaping proved his guess right. Baraggan's speed stemmed from his Senescencia, and in the quagmire of sand, there was nothing but his own body to slow down.

"Such impudence."

"You chose poorly when you decided to come after me, Espada. For one of the few things that are ageless is sand."

"Your reiryoku within the sand is not."

"True, but when you are five hundred meters underground, the pressure from the weight alone will immobilize you." The sand sucked down the axe first, carrying it far away from the Arrancar so he could not access his true form. "Gokusa Maiso."

Baraggan shouted in rage as the earth swallowed him. Through his connection with the sediment, Gaara felt the Espada's power swell, but it was a simple matter to keep the sand below shifting so the Arrancar continued to sink within it. Deeper he went as the pressure climbed. At the prime depth, Gaara commanded the sand to hold Baraggan in place.

"Togu."

The ground rumbled as the leagues of sand churned, each grain moving the other. Unable to unleash his Resurreccion, the Espada could not adequately rot away his energy. Even as he negated the sand close to him, the literal tons of sand surrounding that kept the

technique functioning. Baraggan could only slow its movement, prolonging the agony as the sediment chewed away at him like sandpaper.

The flamboyant pink-haired Espada leaned back dramatically with a cackle as Shikamaru and the others failed to move their feet. The pineapple-haired genius stuck out his bottom lip in annoyance as the Arrancar flowed into another exaggerated motion. His teammates, particularly Naruto and his student, looked nervous and were struggling to break free.

Guess I need to handle this one then.

"How do you like my duplication of your shadow technique?" The Espada leered at the Hokage. "It is admittedly superior is it not?"

"Not really." Shikamaru formed the rat seal. "Kagezukami no Jutsu."

He snagged the rest of the group and forced them to move along the outer-walls.

"So you can do more with them than bind someone to one place or spear them. I hypothesized as much, but wanted to use it only like glue as you demonstrated against Zommari. Actually fighting in such a way seemed so inferior and uncouth compared to my abilities."

We don't have time to listen to every idiot stroking themselves over their abilities.

The Rikudo Sennin had dropped the six of them in this Ark and instructed them to head to the tower at its center. Not ten seconds after entering the spire's first floor, they get caught by the wannabe's shadows. Between listening to him cackle and tell them how hopeless things were against his vast intellect, they had already wasted five minutes.

"Face it, ninja." The word was emphasized mockingly. "You cannot move without wasting your limited energy on a shadow of your own, and I have analyzed every single one of your reiatsu and reishi structures. Thus, I am immune to any attack you have in your barbaric arsenal."

"Six moves." Shikamaru dispelled his control over his team, letting the Arrancar calling himself Szayelaporro Granz bind them again.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm ending this in six moves."

Granz sputtered and then threw his head back in crazed laughter. He clutched at his sides and bowed over as his crazed eye peered up.

"The fact you believe you can defeat me, let alone in so few moves, proves how entirely lacking in intelligence you miserable creatures are." He regained his composure and pushed up his glasses with his palm. "Very well. I shall end this in five moves."

"First move, Kage Kugutsu no Jutsu."

Shadow tendrils wrapped around him, allowing him to mentally move his body like a marionette.

"We're announcing as well? How theatrical!" Szayelaporro closed the distance in a single step. "Move one, Sonido. Move two, dissection!"

Shikamaru drew his trench knives as the Arrancar unsheathed his katana and struck. Using the shadow strings, the Hokage managed to keep up with his opponent's superior speed since the shadow reacted alongside thought rather than muscle.

"Second move." Shikamaru dropped one knife so it stabbed into Granz shadow, paralyzing the scientist. "Kagemane Shuriken no Jutsu."

"My third move will be Resserricion-"

"Kage Nui no Jutsu."

Some of the black strings released his body and stabbed for Granz. Failing to penetrate the Hierro, they still tied down the Arrancar's limbs and bound his mouth. Shikamaru used a tendril to pull back the scientists head and he stabbed down into Szayelaporro's eye, skewering the brain. He twisted hard, instantly killing him.

"Four moves as planned. Sorry about the lie."

Shikamaru saw his friends stumble free as the binding ceased and the Espada's corpse landed with a thud. These high ranking Arrancar were terrifyingly powerful. Every one of them outclassed him in terms of physical prowess and energy. However, they all operated similarly. Hard skin, high speed technique, and an outpouring of reiatsu to shake off attacks and handle normal combat. If they were pressed, they went to release their zanpakuto, which required both blade in hand and a command.

Add in their pride, and it became easy to predict and manipulate. They were used to fighting Shinigami who let them explain everything and wanted to defeat them at full strength. They had no clue how to fight a ninja who would not hesitate to strike in a vulnerable moment.

"You're a lot more." Naruto eyed the dead body warily as it started to dissolve. "Decisive than before."

The Hokage flicked the blood off the one knife and gathered the other.

"We're lucky he chose to gloat instead of finishing us off or setting up for a real fight." He glanced over to Shino. "Have you destroyed all the bugs he had on us?"

"I have."

"Bugs?" Ichigo looked around the inside of his Shihakusho.

"Shino's Kikaichu picked up on them in his system and warned me. Not only did they transmit information back to the Espada, but they contained some of his reiatsu. He was planning for something else as a backup plan. Luckily, Shino destroyed them while I distracted him."

"How did you manage to catch him?" Hinata asked. "He claimed our spiritual energy wouldn't work."

"Shadows can become physical bindings. I couldn't harm him, but I could restrain him long enough to deliver a finishing blow." Shikamaru scanned the body and room one last time to check for any subterfuge. "We have a lot more floors and not a lot of time. Chances are each one will have a guard. Unless we get into another situation like this one, I will be sitting out the rest of the fights. We don't want what happened last time with everyone injured and unable to escape. I'll keep the wounded safe."

She sensed him halfway across the city even with all the chaos around her. No one could be so at ease amidst the fighting and no one produced that distinct smirk, the one so engrained it permeated his very reiatsu. She should ignore it. In spite of the scarily powerful squad, complete with her missing captain, they were being hard pressed to contain the sheer number of Arrancar. Taking them out came first. Gin needed to wait.

He took off, rapidly moving across the rooftops and around the army until he stopped on the opposite edge of the building she'd been fighting on.

So much for ignoring him.

"That stings really bad, Rangiku. Been such a long time since we had a chance ta chat, and ya won't come say hi."

She slowly faced him as her pulse quickened. There was no doubt she couldn't hurt him, not because of feelings, but out of the sheer

difference in their abilities. Fighting him was a waste of time and a dangerous one at that. The others, while far stronger than her, still needed all the help they could get.

But, distracting Gin means he isn't keeping them tied up. If I engage him, the others can continue to whittle down the army.

"That's a scary look on your face,." Gin cracked an eye and looked at the hilt clutched in her hand. "You've even released your zanpakuto."

"Neko Rinbu!"

Ash swirled around the traitor, threatening to shred him.

"Hado 33: Sokatsui." The ash was blasted apart as a blue wave of pure energy erupted from the top. Gin dispelled the rest of the ash with a pulse of reiatsu. "Now, now, don't be like that. Let's just talk for now."

"I'm sorry, Gin, but you've never been one for giving straight answers. Even if I asked why you betrayed us, you won't tell me honestly."

"I suppose you're right. Just figured it'd be nice to converse for one last time." The point of his zanpakuto glinted in the sunlight. "Sorry, Rangiku. Aizen-taicho's orders."

Three versus six- well, five.

Ichigo reached for Zangetsu on his back as the three Espada blocked their way in the large hall. Hinata said the woman was ranked third. He knew Ulquiorra was fourth, which left the lazy looking guy and the young girl berating him. She possessed limited reiatsu and from their body posture, they were close. She probably was his Fraccion so he really didn't need to count her as an Espada number, making the scruffy guy either the first or second.

"Guys, I'm taking the pale one." Ichigo removed his sword from his back. "We have a little history."

"I've seen some of Harribel's technique." Hinata grasped her pendant. "I will fight her."

"So that leaves the lanky guy." Naruto cracked his neck. "Why don't you handle him Lee?"

"He doesn't really seem very energetic."

"Would you rather fight the kid?"

"I shall see if I can inspire Espada-san."

"Children are intimidated by insects." Shino shifted under his jacket. "I will gently dissuade her from entering combat."

"Why do you sound excited about the idea of terrorizing a small child?"

"Yes, gently intimidate."

Ichigo closed the gap in a single step so he stood directly in front of Ulquiorra.

"Yo." Ichigo grinned and rested his sword on his shoulder. "Have any place where we won't bump into other people's fights?"

"You sound like this will be an actual duel and not the thrashing it has been every time you stood before me."

Ichigo grabbed the Arrancar by the collar as his reiatsu rolled out over the hall, surprising everyone. He disappeared in another Shunpo, dragging Ulquiorra with him until they were outside the tower and over the city. He stopped and let go, floating a few feet apart.

"Why didn't you try to knock my hand off and attack?"

"Curiosity." Ulquiorra removed one hand from his pocket. "Why do you intend to face me alone? Is it to settle your pride, or do you think your earlier defeats, as quickly as they occurred, give you some inkling as to what I am capable of? Do you truly believe you've acquired a power that can protect them?"

Ichigo gripped the shoulder of his sword arm and rotated it around a few times.

"It's nothing really like that. Those guys can handle themselves and I don't have a super clear idea of what you can really do." Ichigo brought Zangetsu up to guard in front of him. "Which is why, this time, I want you to start at your maximum power."

Ulquiorra's eye widened a fraction in pure disbelief.

"Foolish arrogance."

"I'm not doing it to see if I can beat you out of some kind of pride. Every one of us know you're not as strong of Aizen. If I can't beat you here, or I barely manage to, they'll have a better idea of his level and be able to plan. There's no point wasting time slowly escalating the fight. Either you're going to release now or I'm going to beat you before you decide to get serious."

Man, Naruto will be pissed if he ever finds out about this.

He'd hung out with the ninja, and seen how they fight, enough to see many windows of opportunity. It went against his personal philosophy, striking them at their disadvantage, but in this situation, he recognized the importance of putting that aside. When he made it to Aizen, the instant he could score a fatal blow, he would. However, they really had no clue about Aizen's level. Ichigo knew he needed to see what the minions could do first, anything to give some sort of idea what they'd be up against. Besides, getting a chance to smooth out the kinks from his improvements was probably better here than against Aizen himself. Ulquiorra may have been only the fourth

Espada, but something told him there was more - deep inside the Arrancar's well.

"Your eyes shine honestly. Somewhere, in spite of the absolute facts, you continue to defiantly believe in your victory. Very well, Ichigo Kurosaki, I will show you my fullest potential. I will fight you beyond my station and reveal myself as the only Arrancar who possesses as second Resurreccion. I will show you complete despair."

"Second?"

"Tozase, Murcielago." Ulquiorra's bright green reiatsu whipped up into a violent storm as the katana merged into him. The reiatsu dissipated for a moment then came down as rain, soaking everything with his power. "Resurreccion: Segunda Etapa."

Pitch dribbled out of his hollow hole as black fur replaced white clothes over his lower body and arms. His feet became talons and the fingers were tipped in claws as a tail whipped around behind him. His mask morphed into long bat ears as his eyes became yellow and green. Two gigantic wings flared out and his reiatsu choked out everything else, becoming so potent Ichigo felt a chill run up his spine.

Yep, Naruto is definitely going to be pissed.

"Odd. Your face remains unchanged." Ulquiorra took a single step closer. "Can your mind not process your terror? Is the despair you must feel so great you can do nothing but stare at your death?"

Ichigo grinned.

"Nah, I'm just trying to figure out if I want to put on my mask." Ichigo brought his hand in front of his face as his sclera became yellow. "I haven't really tested this new version yet."

Hinata walked up in front of Harribel as Allen-kun's power took shape as an armament. The third Espada remained motionless with her blade sheathed. Knowing how Kushina pushed her, Hinata knew she held the advantage at the moment. However, her awakened form already proved to be significantly more difficult to deal with. Could she manage to stop her before her Reserreccion?

"Tell me, why do you wish to stop Aizen-sama from ascending to godhood?"

"Because it will destroy everything."

"Are you really so enamored with this constant cycle of fighting you feel it is worth saving?"

"It is more than the cycle he will destroy. Everything not within this Ark will become stray energy. Everyone will die."

Harribel studied her for a moment. Hinata remained alert, muscles ready to fire in an instant. However, she nearly faulted when the Espada silently moved to the side.

"What are you doing?"

"You have confirmed my suspicions. Only the last of the Espada were allowed entry to this place, and even we are not permitted from going higher up the tower now that the altar is activated. Even the necessity of all this being housed within an entirely separate dimension solidified my worries." She let her arms drop down. "Aizen has betrayed my trust by excluding my Fraccion, my closest friends, from this one place of safety. I detest pointless fighting, and already having clashed with you once, I know you would eventually win. Rather than exhaust you for the fight ahead, I shall return to Hueco Mundo and be with those three as the end comes."

"Why do you not fight with us?"

"Because, I have witnessed his released zanpakuto. I cannot fight him."

"Hey, Harribel, you really shouldn't be doing this." The lanky man looked over to them as a swarm chased the shrieking girl around. "It's going to make life pretty difficult being the only Espada with all these guys."

"You should come with me, Coyote Starrk. Nothing can be gained from protecting someone who disposes of us."

"I don't have any real attachment to this life." He unsheathed his zanpakuto. "Aizen promises the next one will be better. Maybe then, I could walk amongst a group. Lilynette!"

"Alright, let's waste these guys!"

He's not giving us a chance to prevent his release!

"Kechirase, Los Lobos."

She disappeared as two pistols materialized in his hands. Gray fur formed on the edges of his clothes and boots as a bone fragment crept over his left brow as a kind of eyepiece.

He moved so fast Hinata's expanded vision barely kept up. As if she moved in slow motion, her arms failed to come up quickly enough as the barrel stopped in front of her forehead and he prepared to fire.

A foot struck out, kicking the weapon up as a second leg came from underneath and kicked the man away.

"Are you alright, Hinata-san?"

Glowing flecks of green danced within the flames roaring over his gauntlets and greaves. His skin had darkened and his hair waved wildly as his reiatsu created a physical pressure blowing away from him. Her vision saw the discarded flask in Shikamaru's hands - completely empty.

"How many gates is that?"

"Seven, however, I will need to activate the eighth gate. Do not worry my friend, I am not experiencing the damage that normally accompanies Kyomon. The durability of this body is great and the contents of my flask only enhances it. While I will fall unconscious after victory, I shall live."

"Yeah right." The pistols squawked in the girl's voice. "Like we're going to lose period!"

"Quiet you." Starrk tapped the guns together. "My arm's still numb from that kick. And here I was, really hoping I wouldn't have to fight a strong one."

"Shikamaru-san, please step outside. The rest of you should go as well. I will be fine." Lee brought his fists up. "Show me your desire to win, Coyote Starrk!"

Decades passed, his soul floated in oblivion as his spirit watched over his family. In the early years, pride beat in his heart as his son struck ferociously against the Mino while striving to free those subjugated by them. As much as hate festered in his veins, it remained solely dedicated to the Mino. The rest of the world still could be saved.

Years passed and the original villagers perished in their opposition. It started with his wife, who stayed behind so a caravan of freed slaves could escape with the primary group. The second was a dear friend, who helped back the Mino after the slaves, fatigued from months on the run, betrayed their once saviors. Time and again, his son made the crushing, but righteous and tactical choice. Noah was a hero.

And like all heroes who survived the battlefield, he aged and found himself on his death bed surrounded only by the last remaining twelve villagers. The rest had perished or abandoned his son.

It was upon seeing Noah's life fading that the full might of his hatred fused itself to his gift, creating something new to creation. A purely malevolent substance, it was hatred given form, God's gift taken to its true potential as a weapon to unleash punishment upon the wicked.

Dark matter.

His spirit returned to his soul and shattered Hell's chains. The power allowed him to shape a construct - a vessel - capable of saving the innocent. Then, like a bolt of lightning sundering the heavens, he ripped open a portal to the living world.

And now here he stood in the small cave as the once full breathing of his young son came out as the ragged gasps of a fading old man. Adam approached the prone body and knelt beside Noah.

"I waited for you, father." A milky eye stared up blindly at the rocky ceiling. "I always felt your spirit near me and did not want to pass without seeing you again."

Adam rested his hand upon a forehead adorned in wrinkles and scars. Just yesterday it was a smooth unblemished patch often hidden by untidy hair. The once dead chief choked back a sob and lightly kissed his son's head.

"I am sorry, my son."

"Do not be." Cracked lips curved up into a smile. "I look forward to a long rest after such a life. However, I worry for those who remain. These men and women, once the very children you sacrificed yourself to protect, have nowhere to go in this world. The Mino have crept over every inch of this Earth, gripping it in an endless fever of suffering."

"What do you ask of me, Noah?"

"Lead them."

"I cannot lead again. I am… tainted."

"If a soul as noble as you can be considered tainted, then I pray the entire world drinks from the same cup." A shaky calloused hand reached up from under the layers of furs and clutched Adam's. "You are the rightful patriarch of our family."

His son passed a few short breaths later. Slowly, Adam rose and left the cave. The remaining twelve looked up wearily from the fire, but none stood to attack him.

"I see you recognize me as Adam of the Gift. My son has passed and with it the last light of hope for this world." The man held up his hand as dark purple fire sprang to life in his palm. "I extend this salvation to you. It is an invitation to form a new family in honor of my son. Accept this gift and come with me, the Harbinger of the next Millennium."

The Earl opened his eyes as the soft blue glow radiated from the large crystal egg beneath the balcony. He'd forgotten the hope he felt when each one reached out and took the torch passed onto them. The satisfaction as he hunted down every traitor from his village and used his evolved gift to capture their souls. The laughter saturated dinners aboard the Ark as the multitude of animals hibernated in their pens and the Flood washed away the sin of the Mino. There was so much hope - such a grand future filled with children and a reestablished world.

"I am not surprised you are here." He spoke slowly as he turned his attention away from the egg and faced the three ninja entering from the far end. "Due to the light that rescued you from the void, I always felt that the Sage still lived."

"Yeah, he filled in a lot of blanks." Naruto flicked his special kunai out of his sleeve.

"And I'm sure he also justified ruining my family, depriving them of their children."

"We've seen what that crap flowing in your veins does."

"Do you really believe them that weak?" The snapping tone echoed off the walls. "Do you think I am unaware of every facet of my power? Foolish little Naruto, you still do not grasp what this gift of mine is."

"It's evi-"

"It is life!" The Earl swept his arm down at the egg. "It can give as well as take. Like what lies below us. Nestled safely is a great beast, a creature that will destroy all life, providing the reishi necessary for Aizen to reshape the world as he sees fit. I am fully aware my power can create this nightmare, just as I understand it can be tempered to save those worthy."

"My Kikaichu recognize the energy churning within the egg."

"Oh am sure you do, my little bug. I'm sure you remember with impressive detail the monster who assaulted your village and crippled Hinata. The memories I gleamed from its spirit after cutting it free of its host, Jugo. It savored your fear, Shino. It remembers how helpless you were before it, and now that it has absorbed a tremendous amount of dark matter, it seeks to recreate your greatest nightmare!"

"Bring it on, bastard!" Naruto summoned a Rasengan. "I kicked its ass once before, and Shino is a hell of a lot stronger now."

"Care to test that bravado, boy?" The Earl leaned over the railing menacingly. "While I need Hinata to begin anew with the Noah, her blood, rich in cursed energy, is necessary to ignite life within this ultimate Akuma."

"Like we're going to be stupid enough to do tha-"

The armor over her left arm dissipated and she raked her claws over the exposed flesh. Lines of crimson traced down her forearm,

dripping onto the egg beneath her outstretched limb. Streaks of red marred its crystal surface. She brushed Naruto off as he tried to stop her, slicing again and squeezing so more blood showered the egg.

The Earl titled his head to the side.

"Oh, what are you doing, my dear?"

Hinata ignored him and watched the egg as it absorbed the vital liquid. The room fell still.

And then, the egg pulsed.

Ichigo drove Ulquiorra through the wall with a charging slash. The fourth Espada buckled under the pressure, his knees giving out as the Substitute's daito firmly held his clawed hands in place.

"How?" The words seeped out between clenched teeth.

Ichigo quickly pulled his zanpakuto away, ending the blade lock only an instant before driving the pommel down on the Arrancar's head, knocking him out as he sunk to the floor.

"Damn." Ichigo lifted his mask to the top of his head, the horns pointing straight up. He wiped the sweat off his face with a tattered sleeve. "This new version is heavy."

"So, you still require both your Bankai and mask to defeat Ulquiorra, a mere fourth seat."

Ichigo turned toward the unquestioning voice. Aizen sat in the center of the room as a column of light shown down on him. His eyes had become black, with spiraling flames of purple in place of pupils. Hogyoku colored tattoos shimmered over his bare torso as he reclined comfortably in his stone throne.

"I probably would have been able to beat him without the mask, but wanted to get to you quickly."

"Again, you required both to defeat the fourth Espada. Were you truly capable of facing me, you would require neither to swiftly dispose of him."

Ichigo frowned and picked up Ulquiorra by the arm.

He doesn't need to get caught up in this.

He flung the unconscious Arrancar out of the hole they created. Checking over the small cuts in his Shihakusho, Ichigo shrugged and brought his sword up. Only a few scratches and bruises so nothing to worry about there. Now, Aizen's reiatsu, that would be a worry.

I'm going to have to hit him with everything… a lot of times.

Pulling his mask back down, hollow reiryoku flowed into his system as Aizen vanished from his throne. He appeared to the left, ready to behead the teen. Ichigo reached out his hand to the right, catching an invisible blow. The backlash from the strike rushed past him, damaging the wall behind him. Aizen's arm became visible with the rest of the body following suit.

"Interesting." Aizen smirked. "How did you manage to ascertain my location?"

"I don't reveal my abilities to my enemies."

Ichigo lashed out with a sidekick, burying his foot in Aizen's ribs. The would be god split into multiple clones, but the Substitute focused on the faint glimmer of Kyoka Suigetsu's reiatsu coming up behind him. Ichigo rolled under a slash and flipped into a crouch, launching a blast from his sword. He sprinted to the side and swung down hard, clashing into Aizen's hasty block.

The traitor looked surprised.

I thought maybe the first time I got lucky, but I was right. He can fake out all of my senses and disguise his reiatsu with his hypnosis. However, it can't hide the subtle spiritual pressure of his zanpakuto.

"So it wasn't a fluke. You are deserving of praise, Ichigo Kurosaki."

"Save it."

"Very well. Hado 32: Okasen."

His blade emanated yellow energy for a moment, then blasted Ichigo back in a wave. The teen sliced it in half and readied for a surprise attack. However, Aizen calmly walked back to his throne and sat under the light.

"Um."

"You perplex me, Ichigo." Aizen folded one leg over the other and rested his chin on his fist. "You become the first to fully see past the hypnosis of my Kyoka Suigetsu and match me counter for blow. Yet, you feel it inappropriate to receive praise. You fail to see the significance of your accomplishment. Perhaps, I must enlighten you. You see by fully breaking the hypnosis, you effectively render my zanpakuto's ability and its Bankai ineffectual."

"And how's that?"

"Kyoka Suigetsu's Shikai ensnares its target in hypnosis, but only convinces them to believe the illusion because of my craftsmanship. Were I to conjure the image of a bear, you would recognize it was false. My Bankai merely makes it so you believe that bear is real, invoking the symptoms and sensation you would feel in that situation. However, it also carries the same give away, and thus, is quite useless."

Compared to what Kurenai made me see, a bear is nothing!

"What's more, Ichigo, is my current strength easily dispatched of the Visoreds in minutes. They were helpless against me, and I did not even have to utilize my Shikai."

Ichigo bit back the outburst burning his tongue. No, Aizen expected him to react to his arrogance and cruelty. The traitor probably wanted to shake him enough the hypnosis could be brought back into play.

"Why do you refuse to speak, Ichigo Kurosaki? It is rather dull having a one-sided conversation."

"I don't like where you're sitting."

"What a random statemen-"

"Getsuga Tensho!"

The crescent erupted from the entire length of his daito, sweeping across the floor with the speed of a Shunpo and exploding against Aizen and the throne. Ichigo readied for a counterattack from any direction, but as the smoke cleared, it revealed Aizen unmoved, a single leg supporting his entire body in the absence of a seat. The numerous lacerations and burns quickly healing, Ichigo bit back a curse.

"It appears you wish to bring our interaction to a close." Aizen stood and unsheathed his zanpakuto from the rubble. "I had hoped to enjoy this spar a little longer to fully test what my last stage as a lower being could produce."

"You make it sound like you haven't transformed yet."

"My body has taken the proper shape in order to ascend. However." He placed his free hand on his chest and the tattoos brightened. "I chose not to accept the bulk of the power until this point."

Got to stop him fast.

"Getsuga Arashi!"

Pouring every drop of reiryoku into Zangetsu, Ichigo unleashed an unreal storm of crescent waves. The room warped under their presence as they buried Aizen in destructive power. The Substitute squinted as he scanned the rumbling mass for any sign of the traitor's escape.

The pressure hit him like the ultra-heated air of a volcano.

Aizen walked out like a phantom and was standing close the same instant without ever appearing to have done more than walk. Violet reiatsu swirled so harshly it burned away the teen's skin. Aizen grasped the side of Ichigo's head, the grip shattering the skull as the thumb popped a hazel eye.

He ran his blade into exposed stomach, the force disintegrating the wall behind them. Letting go of the crumpled head, Aizen placed two fingers against Ichigo's chest and flicked. The teen was sent flying out of the tower in a streak of blood.

His mangled body splattered against a pristine white wall on the edge of the Ark.

Author's Notes:

Bah, a little late again. Vacation is done this weekend so getting distracted by video games and TV won't be an issue after this.

Curious to how the Sennin and Earl histories will be received.

I had/have concerns on how Gaara's fight will be taken. Originally, I had the thought of Baraggan terrorizing Soifon like in the canon and having Gaara step in, much to the same effect as what ultimately happened. However, given the 2nd Espada's capabilities for strategy, I felt it was more true to the character to go after the defense's tactician (Gaara) and gain an easy victory by breaking down the Shinigami force's organization. As for how quickly it went, well, I hope I explained that accurately enough within the story itself.

I'm sure there are questions about Gin, but please hold off for a little while longer.

I think that is everything.

See you next week.

Deities

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 23

Uryu flipped, firing a multitude of arrows in a vertical ring, each bolt piercing through at least four Arrancar. Reinforcements immediately filled the void and encroached on his waning space. Stretching his hand out, roman numerals of reishi formed on his fingers. Brilliant cross shaped columns of energy surrounded him, reaching high into the air and then expanding out, shielding him while tearing apart the Arrancar.

"Kirchenlied: Sankt Zwinger." Uryu readied another arrow as cramps ran from his hands up to his shoulders. "I suppose I should be grateful for that brutish training of Lee-san's, since it's taken this long for fatigue to begin."

The ward faded as another ominous cloud of monsters descended.

There's no end to them.

Twenty, thirty, some times even fifty Arrancar were caught up in his companion's attacks and still the sky didn't clear. How had Aizen made so many? How had he made his soldiers strong enough to press them? Certainly, he and his allies overpowered each Arrancar by far. He simultaneously defeated three of the Espada's Fraccion by himself. However, every action did little to chisel away at the overall swarm. At this rate, they would lose purely from being exhausted.

"You're tiring, Uryu." Sado landed roughly beside him, his voice distorted under the helmet of liquid armor. "Is that change to your cross causing problems?"

Uryu glanced down at the small fragment of an Asauchi grafted onto his bangle. It had been an experiment of Urahara's at the behest of Yamamoto. They needed him in the fight, but realized the threat he posed by killing a large number of hollow. While the procedure had been far more complicated than merely adding a chip from a nameless zanpakuto to his Quincy power, it nevertheless boiled down to that.

His father would probably kill him on the spot if he saw his cross desecrated by the one's who nearly hunted them to extinction.

It was our arrogance and fear that drove us to our own end. And besides, he'd agree the end of the world can make for strange allies.

"No, Sado. It is functioning as intended without deluding or draining my strength." He forged more reishi into the arrow to demonstrate his point. "I was merely taking a short rest!"

"Hinata, what?" Naruto forced his voice to remain level as a lump swelled in his throat and malignant reiatsu began to roll off of the egg. "Why did you just wake up the thing supposed to bring about the end of the world?"

"Allen-kun explained to me that as long as that thing remains, the Earl will continue to have the means of making new calamities. The true egg, this egg, was the one thing he failed to destroy." The armament reestablished itself over her rapidly healing arm. "This monster is the embodiment of the egg's power. By waking it early, I prevented it from reaching its peak strength, giving us a very small chance to defeat it and destroy the egg - ending this for good."

A heads up would have been nice.

"You wound me, Hinata." The Earl's voice echoed from the far hall as his shadow bounded away. "And here I had hoped you finally saw the light."

Naruto bit back a curse. It didn't take a genius to figure out the Earl was trying to separate them. He could already sense this thing would be a handful. And the Earl… neither Hinata nor himself could handle the gray man alone. Who knew if they would even get another chance to finish the Noah off before he had a chance to backup Aizen or do something else to cause problems?

We can't let him get away.

"Go." Shino stepped up the edge and peered down, the pulsing glow reflecting in his glasses. "I will handle things here."

"Shino-kun?"

"Do not worry, Hinata. Go."

Naruto learned about that tone from back during the Danzo mission when the bug-user wanted to face off with his traitorous clansman. This matchup was personal. Not just because the Earl mocked him, but because Jugo's monster form is what pushed him into undertaking the risks of gaining all three breeds of his family's insects. It was the single loss that almost cost Hinata everything. It drove him back then, and considering Shino's knack for holding grudges, it likely still drove him.

Naruto gently grabbed Hinata's arm.

"Shino will be fine." Naruto gave a light tug. "The Earl's our problem."

"Yes, you're right. Good luck, Shino-kun."

They sprinted into the opposite hall and raced up the stairs. Nature energy flooded his system as a Bunshin he had tucked away dispelled. A fresh curse danced on his lips. Ichigo's signature was gone and Aizen's reiatsu made his head hurt sensing it. That combination frightened him, but he needed to put his worries aside. Sasuke's presence was coming up around the next corner. Deal with

him first, the Earl second, and then, if Ichigo was still missing, they throw everything they have left at Aizen.

First thing's first.

"Naruto."

"I know, Hinata."

They slowed and came to a full stop as Sasuke's eyes appeared in the center of the corridor, glowing with a tempered fury. The pattern had shifted from its regular tri-tomoe design, into another variation of the Mangekyo Sharingan, which meant he'd have some crazy powers. The Susanoo was the obvious one, but who knew what else the bastard had?

"This is as far as you two go." The armored manifestation enveloped him. "We have unfinished business."

"Hinata, go on ahead. I'll be there soon."

She nodded and darted forward.

"I said-"

An orange-red reiryoku claw grabbed the manifestation by the waist and slammed Sasuke into the corner where wall met floor, pinning him there as Hinata blew by and disappeared around the corner. Five intricate fox tails swung lazily with each step as Naruto walked closer.

"Take it easy, bastard. She's already beaten you once before."

He let his one-time friend stand.

"I admit she impressed me with her power. Were you not going to die here, I'd say you were lucky."

"I am lucky, Sasuke. Hinata is the most awesome person I have ever met." Naruto grinned, showing his elongated canines. "She's a better kisser than you too."

Sasuke's scowl twisted up into a smirk, that cracked with a chuckle and grew until booming laughter bounced off every stone, carrying amusement and a solemn undertone. The latter didn't matter. For a moment, they were rivals again; old friends unmarred by the bitterness and circumstances that led them it two conflicting directions.

"I had nightmares about that for a month." Sasuke's words came out staccato until he got his breath under control. "For what it is worth, I wish you had stayed out of my way all those years ago."

"And for what it's worth, I'm sorry I couldn't show you a better path."

Sasuke's face softened to a strange whimsical and regretful smile.

"I still blame you for everything bad that happened since that day you captured me. I blame you for Sakura and for Itachi. I understand your good intentions, but I still believe it is all your fault. And honestly, I hate feeling that way, Naruto, but I do."

Naruto nodded, yet a grin remained on his lips.

"I know. For a long time, I blamed myself too, before I learned to let go of all the guilt. Team Seven did so much to bring you back and you threw it away. We did enough… I did enough, and it's past time we both realize you chose not to reach for my extended hand. I know you will never accept that, but it's the truth."

A bow and arrow formed in the Susanoo's hands.

"I'm going to kill you, Naruto." Sasuke maintained the odd smile and his tone remained even. "And if you should win, I will never stop finding a way to come back after you."

"And I'll knock you back into that Pit every single time, Sasuke."

They clashed in a maelstrom of reiatsu and will. Sasuke rained down fire and lightening as his manifestation attempted to strike with conjured weapons. Naruto countered with tails and claws. However, something nagged at the Jinchuriki as the seconds ticked on. It felt like he wasn't in his body, more like he was watching the battle unfold like a spectator. Wasn't this the ultimate battle he always dreamed of? It should be. This time both of them were fully prepared. They were throwing some of their best moves into the clash. It should be the epic ending to their conflict - the means to finally settle things.

But as he watched Sasuke, coming at him so intensely and barely keeping up with only the tails he was using, it became clear how big the gap had become. It wasn't really in terms of ability or strength. No, the difference was in Sasuke's face. His old friend was chasing him, using the battle to climb out of the coffin he'd buried himself in. Sasuke was fighting for validation, that his choices were right and his failures were the result of getting screwed over. He was mired in the past.

Naruto had moved on and left behind a person who refused to.

"Wakusei Rasengan."

A large sphere formed in his hand as reiryoku claws formed smaller ones that orbited it. He drove it into the Susanoo's ribcage, the alternate paths setting off a powerful imbalance that exploded into a crushing vortex that burrowed into the manifestation and smashed Sasuke out the other side.

The wall crumbled down burying him, but Naruto brushed it away with an extended claw.

The last Uchiha lay broken on the floor as his doujutsu faded back to their normal onyx eyes. Naruto powered down as he approached, smiling down sadly. Sasuke barely managed to lift his trembling arm

as color faded from his skin with each choppy breath. His eyes watered as he reached for the blonde.

"Naru-to, don- don't leave." He gurgled another syllable and a raspy exhalation cleared his throat. "I'm not done. We're - not done until… I haven't lost. I'm not-"

Naruto caught his dropping hand. He'd imagined this moment so many different ways. The one thing he'd say that would redeem Sasuke or break off his desire to save his old friend. It wasn't possible though. Sasuke had to fight those last battles with himself. And after everything, Naruto knew he couldn't abandon someone hurting. It was an impossible contradiction.

And as his many loved ones had reminded him, that's where he was meant to act.

"I really hope, one of these times, you figure things out, Sasuke." He squeezed the hand tighter as kindness radiated off of him. "If that ever happens, I'll be there to welcome you home."

He let go, the hand dropping limply to the ground. Focusing on Hinata's reiatsu he moved away with his head up high. The last choking gasps grew softer and farther apart, until the dull thud of a heartbeat stopped - and the hall went silent.

Rangiku cradled the wound on her stomach as Gin flicked blood from his blade. Aiming to strike again, a tendril of sand snatched his wrist and altered the aim so the lengthening spear pierced a dozen Arrancar. The sand went to snap the arm, but Gin immediately shifted the sword to his other hand and cut it free.

Gaara held his dagger up in front of him defensively, inching around to stand between the two. The portion of cloth below Gin's knees was tattered and stained red, creating the slightest imbalance to the traitor's movements. Rangiku may have been lazy, but lazy did not

mean unobservant. She knew he would come for her when she and Gin clashed.

And she knew Gin was faster.

"Thought I'd soften him up for you, Gaara-taicho."

"Are you alright?"

"Will be."

"Look at our little reunion. Brings back memories don' it, Gaara-kun?" Gin passed his blade back to his original hand. "Rangiku-chan watchin' us havin' a friendly spar. So many happy times."

I should have used the sand clot to remove his jaw in our last encounter.

"Rangiku, have you asked your questions?"

"Rangiku? Ya've finally moved to first names. You sped up a bit, Garra-kun."

He could feel her gaze on his back.

"I've learned everything I'm going to."

"Very well."

He waved his hand and sand surged out of his gourd as he darted forward. Gin dodged and blocked the slash.

"This is kind of repetitive don't ya think?"

Gaara negated the counter.

"No." Sand swelled up from behind Gin, wrapping around his head and dragging him into a granular wave. The traitor cut his head free before Gaara could crush it. However, the sand caught the arm,

dragging Gin in and consuming him. The ex-Kazekage clenched his hand into a fist. "Sabaku Soso"

"Bankai!" A titanic beam erupted out of the crushing mass of sand and Gin escaped, holding the same wakizashi. "Kamishini no Yari."

Something's not right.

Every nerve in his body tingled in agitation as the traitor spun the blade around in his palm. There wasn't any discernable change like with what normally accompanied Bankai. It'd almost make him think Gin was bluffing - but, that beam. Nothing he ever saw Gin use produced something so large and fast.

"You look confused, Gaara-kun. Do you need to see it again?"

His sand came up in a tightly compressed wall out of sheer instinct, slowing the lengthening blade barely enough for him to twist out of the way. It retracted instantly, likely as quickly as its expansion.

"This would be when I'd tell ya all about my Bankai. It's length and how it's the fastest zanpakuto. You don't want any a' that though cause you don't trust poor old Gin. You're too busy thinkin' of a way to stop it with that scary sand a' yours."

The sand won't slow him a second time.

"Suna Kiritori Gokusha."

Geysers of sediment broke through the rooftop, quickly surrounding Gin and forming the bladed cage.

"Buto." Gin held the weapon to his chest. "Renjin."

The spear fired in imperceptible succession, cutting apart the technique. Gaara regained control of the severed pieces, commanding them to bombard the traitor. Smaller and more numerous they became and he continued to remain in control of every grain, prodding for a chance to get past Gin's barrage.

If I can just get enough in his lungs or ear canal.

The blade shot out longer than previously and cleanly sliced Gaara's right side from shoulder to hip. His jaw dropped in horror as a three inch wide strip began to peel away from the main torso. He caught his arm and literally pulled himself back together as Gin clicked his tongue in a chastising sound.

"I thought ya'd learned not to stand around so much, Gaara-kun. That's really disappointin' ya know."

Clenching his teeth against the pain, Gaara manipulated his sand to shred a long strip from his haori and wrap it around his severed torso while more sediment packed the wound to clot it. Gin brought the blade back up to his chest.

Rangiku raced forward.

"Gaara!"

"Bye-bye."

Sand knocked the point away and hammered against the traitor's legs, nearly-breaking the knees backward. Gaara lunged for him, dagger prepared in his functioning arm. Gin fought to stay upright as a painful smirk etched itself over his face.

"Sand an' slash, you're too predictable, Gaara-ku-"

The sand-nin tossed the dagger up and snatched Gin by the jacket as his sand ensured the wakizashi remained facing away. Catching the dagger with his teeth, Gaara yanked the traitor close and plunged the blade into his throat. The Captain twisted roughly, severing the artery in a grizzly spray of crimson.

Gin wasn't sure when he ended up staring at the sky. It just kinda happened. His gaze drifted to the side. Rangiku frantically tried to

stop the blood pooling around Gaara's prone body.

Good.

It'd been a gamble, intentionally attempting to kill the redhead. But for both of them to believe it, he couldn't hold back. They needed to be absolutely convinced of his status as the cruel traitor who wanted to murder them. Otherwise, she wouldn't ever move on and he wouldn't stop hesitating.

He'd almost let the persona slip when he caught Gaara in the chest. Killing him was the last thing he wanted. But the young captain surprised him and won without any question. He'd probably survive and Rangiku wouldn't need to cry anymore. She never would need to worry about where Gaara slipped off to or him not being honest. She'd never have to be alone again.

She really hated being alone.

At least I didn' make a mess out a this one.

Since the first time he saw Rangiku and spoke with her, he never wanted to see her like when he found her broken on that dirt road. The more he got to know her, the deeper his feelings ran. It made him hate the man who stole her life force to feed the Hogyoku on Aizen's orders.

It made him realize how such a horrible man needed to die.

That single epiphany drove every waking second of his life. He became Aizen's most loyal subordinate. He committed atrocity after atrocity. He abandoned Rangiku. He did all of that and failed to find an opportunity to kill the man he hated above all else. That privilege resided with Ichigo now. And Rangiku's happiness would now be with another. He'd manipulated the board enough for the other pieces to carry on his goals. And if dying as the villain guaranteed that, it was fine.

Right?

Now that I've made sure they hate me, I'm actually feelin' a little sad about it. It hurts a bit, seeing the woman you love more than anything shedding tears for another guy.

He blinked once for what felt like a small moment. When he opened them, Rangiku was pulling away from a kiss she'd planted on his forehead. He gave a bloody smile as his vision tunneled around her face.

That Rangiku, giving small mercies to a villain like me.

Rangiku watched as Gin's eyes glazed over and his chest stilled. She shed no tears, simply staring down at one of the most important people in her life. Maybe, it was wrong to say goodbye and plant a chaste kiss on his forehead. He tried to kill her, may have killed Gaara, and helped Aizen achieve terrible goals. Even if he had been a dear friend, even if Gaara told her to see Gin off, someone like that did not deserve any kindness or a tender farewell. Besides, he always hid himself. Who knew if this was merely another one of his games?

All that had shuffled around in her head, and yet, she still went over to him. It wasn't for her benefit. She'd made peace. It was for the traitor himself. For all the smirks and mockery, the aloofness, just this once the persona slipped.

He had been crying and never even noticed it.

"Katon: Karyu Endan!"

Snaking dragons of pure flame scorched across the sky, incinerating the Arrancar closing in on her and Gaara. Her head snapped around as a young man with a staff used it to fling a young woman high into the air. More Arrancar swarmed her as she helplessly fell, only for

her to methodically spin and lash out with a series of taps to their Saketsu and Hakusui, sealing their power and making them crumble.

The kid landed on the rooftop and spun the staff around his neck until it rested over his shoulders as he crouched low.

"We've got a medic-nin on the way, lady. Keep Kazekage-dono alive until then."

The woman landed gracefully beside him as veins pulsed around her eyes.

Rangiku blinked in surprise. While sharper facially, she could have passed for Hinata at a quick glance.

"Why are you staring at me?"

How can she tell? She hasn't even looked at me.

"Do you know Hinata?"

"She is my sister." She nudged the man on his arm and nodded in another direction toward the battlefield. "The Raikage and his unit are moving closer to the woman generating that deadly cold. We need to have everyone steer clear of her."

"On it." The young man formed a crossed seal like she'd seen Naruto use and four more of him popped up around them. "We have to cover these two until a medic arrives, go warn Raikage-dono."

"Rodger!"

Rangiku moved over to the edge. Dozens of men and women wearing plated headbands and using strange techniques sped along walls and bounded around obstacles with a peerless ease. They wielded the elements themselves, seamlessly working together to protect themselves and defeat the stronger Arrancar.

Is this what Gaara was trying to teach?

"Who are you people?"

"We're ninja!" The boy grinned and hopped up beside her. "Our leader said you guys were shorthanded on this front. Since we had plenty of people ready to defend the barriers at home, a few of us decided to come help you out."

"We'd have been here sooner, if that obnoxious little girl hadn't accidentally left us at the city limits and rushed off."

Nel.

The building shook as a hulking Arrancar landed on the far side. Its armor glistened in the sunlight as the tile cracked under its feet. Steam escaped from its jagged mouth as it drew a cleaver from its hip.

"Oooh, that's a big one." The man's grin took on a darker tone as a spiraling sphere of fire spiraled to life in his hand. "Ready to get to work, princess?"

They tore across the rooftop, zigzagging between and over each other in a fluid dance. She vaulted off his shoulder into a spin as blue reiryoku formed in her palms. With a fierce battle cry, she swung her hands down as he went low and the attacks slammed into the Arrancar simultaneously.

Lee parried a strike from the sword beam emanating from one of the gun barrels and smashed the back of his fist into the side of Starrk's face. The Espada rolled with the motion and swung his other gun up, firing a blistering rain of blue cero. The ninja dodged each one as the firing rate increased.

"Cero Metralleta."

Adding in the second pistol, the grouping of blasts became so frequent and clustered Lee couldn't dodge. Instead, he expanded the

flames form his palms to make a shield. Explosions chiseled away at the fire wall as Starrk appeared next to him and took aim.

He is faster than his own attack?

"Cero Metralleta."

"Shimon open!" Lee escaped and reappeared next to the Espada. "Yakedo Konoha Ya!"

The nearly invisible punch struck Starrk's guard, setting him aflame and launching him out the tower wall and across the city. Lee's toes touched the floor and burst forward out the same opening, leaving craters at every point of contact. Effortlessly dodging another shot, he came face to face with an ethereal wolf. He blocked reflexively as it bit down.

The explosion itself dwarfed all the other buildings, decimating an entire block of the city. Lee restarted the flames over his cracked gauntlet and tried to shake the ringing from his ears. He barely escaped that attack in the last moment.

Such impressive power.

Starrk's reiatsu shook the very air and an entire pack of identical wolves charged. Lee kicked one away, but it reformed and lunged again. Zipping around them, the taijutsu master went straight for the Espada. Starrk summoned two beam swords to his hands as the wolves flew up.

The air cracked with every exchange, the air heating from the sheer friction of their speed. The beasts occasionally bit down, Lee managing to speed away the instant they detonated, preventing any critical damage.

They kicked each other away and paused for a moment. Bleeding patches of burnt skin and damaged zanpakuto layered aching

muscles as Lee's chest heaved. Starrk's shoulders slumped forward as he tiredly brushed off the charred portions of his clothes.

"Your speed is a little higher than mine, but you can't damage me as quickly as I can you." Starrk straightened up as more wolves formed around him. "I became the Primera, the first Espada, because my reiatsu was so great other hollow died by merely being around me. To be honest, I always hated that."

"Is that why you sided with, Aizen? You say this world holds no meaning for you. Is it because you were alone, Starrk-san?"

"Yeah. Maybe in another life, I can be weak enough to be around others."

"That is foolish."

Starrk blinked in surprise.

"How do you figure?"

"You are fighting me at your full power right now are you not?" Lee brought his fist over his heart. "I am still standing here. There are many of us strong enough to stand with you. You do not need a new world to be free of loneliness."

"Shinigami and hollow are enemies."

"We are men. It is our actions that will either bind or divide us. If you do not bring harm to others, I would be honored to call you friend."

Starrk gave a half grin.

"You beat me, and I'll believe you."

"I am happy to hear that." The flames roared as they covered Lee's hands and feet, forcing his hair to whip wildly around his head. "When you wake up, I hope you adhere to those words."

"You make it sound like this is going to be it."

"It is."

Lee jumped up, dodging the wolves and attacking in an onslaught of punches and kicks. Starrk blocked and countered each strike as the pack readied for another mauling. Bandages emerged from under Lee's gauntlets and the ninja bound the Arrancar's wrists together.

"Konoha Tatsumaki!"

Lee broke into a dizzying spin. Swinging Starrk wide from the bandage made rope, the Espada's body was smashed into buildings and his own explosive pack. The wind churned with them, rapidly generating a twister that pulled in more air and debris. It shaped into a full tornado that ate away at the Ark itself. Whipping the cord overhead, Lee flung Starrk down the funnel into the ground. The Espada's body crumpled under the force as it drilled deeper into the Ark, the tailing vortex driving him unrelentingly harder. Lee soared down through the storm's eye as fire engulfed each hand; the thermal waves forcing the tornado apart.

"Yakedo Fenikkusu!"

. His fingers pierced Starrk like talons as the flames became mighty wings of liquid fire. Lee shouted as the fires intensified, igniting the Arrancar as the super-heated air blasted away everything around them.

"This sucks!"

Ichigo's inner-hollow stomped against a conjoined building, knocking the skyscraper over. He scratched furiously at his head and steadily trampled over bowlegged to another defenseless structure.

"Um, is that going to make me brain dead or anything?" Ichigo winced as the hollow screamed and smashed something else. "I

mean, I've always wondered if those were parts of my memory or something."

"How the hell can you worry about that?" The hollow swung an arm out to the side. "We got absolutely pasted!"

"We?"

"Yes, Ichigo. I 'm taking some of the blame for being a sludge mark on the side of the building. Do you feel good knowing you fought really well and still ended up like road kill?" His smile tightened into a sneer. "Cause I damn sure don't! I don't like it when my power is outclassed, Ichigo. I don't like knowing that even if I took control I wouldn't end up any differently than you." He shook his head and marched forward. "Screw it, we're doing this."

A younger Zangetsu caught his out reaching hand with an impassive glare.

"Come on! Are you still bent out of shape that Ichigo won't be able to participate in the magic of friendship anymore?" The hollow snatched the once old man by the coat. "Maybe you didn't realize it, but the freaking world is ending!"

"Hey, ease up." Ichigo separated the two. "We don't even know if letting me go all out will even do anything against him."

"Why are you frigging calm?"

"Either I'm getting a chance to fight or I'm not. Losing my temper isn't going to change that."

The specter nodded in approval.

"You've matured, Ichigo."

The hollow flung up his hands with a frustrated scream through his clenched teeth.

"Can this power of mine work? How do I even have it?"

"You can at least tell him that much."

Zangetsu hesitated for only a moment and then let out a short sigh.

"There is a great deal of history we do not have time to explain. Any questions you have will need to wait until after this crisis." Ichigo nodded silently. "Your hollow did not come into being during the awakening of your personal Shinigami powers. He became a part of you at the moment of your conception. As natural enemies, his hollow powers continually grew in order to overcome your Shinigami side, and the same held true in reverse. Before you ever took shape, they battled for control, and continued to do so throughout your life, climbing to higher levels every second while you innocently played, ate, and slept. I, as another aspect of your strength, sealed both away so you exclusively utilized my power instead."

"You get it now?" The hollow folded his arms over his chest with a calmer tone. "You've been drawing everything from him and a few scraps I could toss your way. I've been able to give you more since Hell, but you haven't even touched your Shinigami stuff yet."

Ichigo's throat ran dry. A Shinigami always had two sources of power, theirs and their Zanpakuto. A Visored had that plus an inner-hollow. All this time, he was using exclusively his zanpakuto? Just how much reiatsu did he really have?

"Had this situation not become so apocalyptic, I planned on providing you with a temporary power derived from the Quincy technique Letzt Stil. It would have granted you a great strength at the cost of your powers. It was yet another deception on my part in order to protect you."

We are going to have a long talk when all of this is finished up.

"And now?"

Shino calmed the agitated hives in his system as the nightmare took shape. As if the crystal were liquid, it slowly rose out of the egg until it hovered over it, resembling the beast that started him on this path. The malicious energy still radiated off every inch of its imposing frame. The nearly black skin still stretched taught over the same inhuman muscles. At quick glance, he would have mistaken it as the same creature that often hung in the corner of his vision. However, the small variations became more noticeable as it floated up to the railing. The jaw was a little different - narrower - and it jut out straight instead of its old flatness. The bone protrusions had been swapped for purplish crystals swirling with dark matter.

It growled almost mockingly as its soulless glowing eyes recognized him.

"It is good you remember me." Shino removed his hands from the coat pockets. "I want you to fully comprehend-"

The creature lunged and swiped at him. Shino blocked the arm and held it in place.

"This will not be the same as last time."

The nano-parasites crawled off his hand onto the beast's arm. It recoiled and ripped off its arm. The limb almost immediately regenerated as the forsaken appendage's cells dissolved under the Rinkaichu's poison. With its aura already far more potent than the last time, he'd need to rely on internal damage. However, unlike the Espada Yammy, its extreme healing would negate flesh damage, and given how quickly it discarded its arm, his poison nano type posed a significant threat to it. He needed to save them for the right moment - when he could catch it unaware and damaged. Shino increased his reiatsu, pooling his reiryoku into the strength and armor-type colonies. It would come down to a physical battle until he wore it down enough for his insects to eliminate it.

I must also be sure to destroy the egg as well.

The thing punched, unleashing a melon-sized bullet of air. Shino leaned around it as it fired another. Calculatingly weaving from projectile to projectile, he closed the distance and landed a cracking uppercut into its long jaw. The thing swung its arm across, Shino ducking and punching it twice in the face as retaliation.

The ninja sent a small swarm of Kikaichu into its face. The regular insect tore at its soft tissue and valiantly struggled to drain some of the monster's energy. The beast lifted its hands to swat the last of them away as its reiatsu killed off the majority, giving Shino the chance to nail it square in the chest.

The monster slid back and roared, a cursed aura blowing another wave of insects away, but failing to dislodge the explosive type growing over its chest. The engorged bug popped, driving shards of crystallized blood into the monster. The apocalyptic herald stumbled back as bubbling sludge dripped out and pooled at its feet.

The wound closed with a snort.

Expected, but unfortunate.

The degree to which it could recover, from otherwise fatal attacks, that is what gave it its place as a grand destroyer. There were more powerful and far more intelligent beings among the enemy's forces, but it alone was closest to immortality. The unceasing endurance and destructive reiatsu were merely means for it to fulfill its purpose more easily than others. It never tired. It never stopped coming.

The poison nano type should still be capable of permanently eliminating this creature. Keeping its attention diverted is another matter.

An energy backed roar knocked Shino off his balance. The monster charged faster than before, tackling him to the ground as it attempted to maul him. He punched it under the armpit, depositing a few of his Kidaichu to feed off its flesh. The creature opened its mouth wide, belching scorching violet flame over him. Ignoring his

melting flesh, the ninja kicked the monster away and flipped to his feet as the giant bugs burst out of its back and chest. Shino tore off the smoldering remains of his jacket as the healing type quickly devoured his charred skin and secreted a repairing fluid that would serve as a false skin until healthy tissue reformed.

He peeled off the remains of his glasses as the beast smashed the giant bugs feeding on his body. Shino shot forward as purplish bugs covered his skin. The monster spewed more cursed flames, but the bug-user leapt through the wave, gripping its jaw and snapping its mouth shut. He elbowed its head and then punched into its body, every point of contact leaving more toxic parasites to destroy its very cells. Checking the monster with a shoulder charge, a wave of the Rinkaichu leapt off him onto the beast.

The monster stumbled back and clawed at its body, failing to remove the multiplying infestation within every fiber and fluid of its body. Its skin began to slough off as it leaned against the railing. Shino kicked it over the barrier into the empty space over the egg. Appearing above it, the ninja dropped the point of his elbow into the skull of the beast, sending it crashing into the egg as he caught the railing and hung by a single arm.

The crystal formation cracked and absorbed the beast, throwing the Rinkaichu into a frenzy as they spread out into the semi-organic artifact. The clear blue clouded as they swarmed within it and the cracks on the top raced down to its base. The light gave a final pulse alongside a defeated growl as the egg became a murky gray. It completely shattered, spilling the viscous remains of the destroyer onto the floor as it all rotted away.

Shino stared for a moment then slowly pulled himself up as his healing-type went to work repair his fractured elbow. It was probably unwise to strike the monster hard enough to damage both armor and bone, but it felt necessary in the moment. He'd assumed the beast would return to the egg, and he did not want the insects to finish it off before it did so.

He slumped over the edge with a groan and let his battered body tumble to the floor - the smooth stone was still warm from the flames and his insects enjoyed working on him in the added heat. As much as he wanted to join the others, he needed to patiently wait for his body to mend and his strength to return.

I must relax patiently. Even if all I do is carry them home, I must be strong enough to make sure we all leave this mission alive.

"It's almost pathetic isn't it?"

Who said that?

"I achieve all of this omnipotence. I vanquish the last man who could possibly stand against me. My victory is assured. My ascension is absolute. My world will soon come into being." The voice paused and it almost felt like someone touched her cheek. "And yet, I fail to shake this sliver of lonesomeness that tells me I'd prefer being around Momo… around you, more so than achieve what I was born to do."

Why can't I move?

"I suppose, being a god does not mean I am without burdens. Perhaps, it is better that I cherish this feeling, to better understand how to prevent it from happening to others. It makes sense. Does it not? I was born superior - enlightened - yes, every aspect of my existence was necessary so that I may be ordained as a truly just god."

"Experiencing this talk as the recipient, it really does sound idiotic."

The world fell away into white, and Orihime had form again. A lanky man with black hair and strange eyes stood across from her with an emotionless expression.

"Who are you?"

"Nagato. Your… counterpart." The man approached her. "I apologize it has taken me so long to reach you. It is, unsettling to be locked away in stone." He smiled humorously. "The irony of being a sacrifice is likely karmic justice for me, but for you, I'm sorry you share a similar fate."

"I'm not-" Orihime brought her hands to her chest as her eyes became downcast and memories fell into place. "Aizen… he's become unstoppable - hasn't he?"

"I can't tell from here. Frankly, there is nothing we can do even if he is. We've lost our ability to impact that world."

"There has to be something!" Tears streamed from the corners of her eyes as she shook her fists. "Aizen said my power can reject fate, maybe if-"

He never spoke, but the pitying look on his face cut her like glass. Her knees buckled and she collapsed, burying her hands in her face. This wasn't supposed to happen. She knew there had been no way to stop Aizen out there. He guarded the Hogyoku and everyone outclassed her. Her only hope - her entire plan - it all came down to her destroying the altar from inside it. As the stone replaced her inch by cold frightening inch, she told herself to remain conscious. She chanted endlessly that once she became part of the altar, she needed to reject its existence. The dark matter, the Hogyoku, Aizen - all of it would be over if she had just called out her power.

"I want- I wanted - to save everyone." Sobs broke her words as all the bravery and strength she'd displayed during her imprisonment left her. "I wanted to protect Kurosaki-kun and Sado-kun and Uryu-kun and Rukia-chan. I knew they could overcome the Espada and the armies. I just had to stop Aizen from reaching this point. It was the only thing I could do to protect them and I- I… why couldn't I?"

Her voice broke with the last words as she wept within the purgatory of white.

Nagato knelt down in front of her and gently took her by the wrists.

"I too tried to find a way. There is no need to feel like you failed when we were powerless the moment they placed us on that altar, and too weak to prevent it from happening in the first place." He pulled her hands away. "Our bodies and abilities are no longer our own. There is no reason for our spirits to reside here any longer."

"I don't want to leave them."

"Nor I my Konan. It is cruel, but what we want is impossible. As I did once in the past, we must again rely on Naruto Uzumaki and his comrades to do what we cannot."

"Aizen and the Earl are just too strong."

"As was Madara and his minions. It did not prevent them from succeeding."

"The human heart is such a terribly weak thing." The Earl rocked back onto his heels without turning to face Naruto and Hinata. "Why, it convinced me a little urchin was the reincarnation of my son, which is why I made him the fourteenth Noah. That decision destroyed us not only once, but ultimately led to the permanent end of my family of twelve."

Naruto glanced over at the dried blood clinging to Hinata's once busted lip. The fat bastard didn't even have a scratch on his coat. That put an entire new set of worries on the table, considering last time, she fought almost evenly for over an hour.

"Maybe, we should all die, no Noah, no humans or Shinigami or hollow. Let the young god use his imagination for what's to come next. I'd like to think that would be the wiser path. However, the part of me my son claimed was noble, the part my Ileana and my daughters loved, the part the Noah followed; it wants to give us a chance to continue. The smidge of belief is still nestled in my soul

that hopes for a future I could never grasp with my hands through countless lifetimes." With hands still clasped behind his back, the Earl tilted his head back so his mad eyes caught them. "I shall ask you one final time. Accept me and I will turn you both in to the progenitors of a new world. You will no longer have to fight or feel sorrow. You can have a wonderful family that will join with whomever Aizen wills into creation. Or decline, and we will have our grand finale here and now."

"It's kind of tough to have a grand finale when you keep coming back."

"As I told Hinata, this is the end for me. Like the Sage before me, I have invested all of my being toward this goal. After escaping and later reviving Jashin and Sasuke, Hell's chains have no doubt acclimated to my power. Should I be chained into that Pit again, there will be no escape for me." He lifted his toes and slowly rotated on his heels until he faced them fully. "Should I take your curiosity to mean you wish to stomp upon my olive branch?"

Hinata sunk low in her stance.

"Is there any way you'll stop this?"

"No."

"Then we have to stop you."

Hyper-dense cursed energy formed around her arms as all nine-tails emerged from Naruto's cloak. Hinata zipped up as the Earl dragged the massive broadsword out of the ether and into existence. She blocked the strike with both arms as sparks flaked off the contact. Naruto was already above the Earl, a demonic Rasengan spinning in his palm. The Earl lifted his free hand overhead, a dark sphere clashing against Naruto's.

Hinata ducked under the sword with a sweep. He hopped over it and energy exploded out of every pore in her body.

"Soudai Kaiten!

The energy coalesced into a powerful dome, knocking him higher.

"Bijudama Rasenshuriken!"

Binding Kyubi's demonic power to Naruto's wind affinity and senjutsu, the midnight black sphere trailed with an eerie orange glow. The Earl sliced it in two and cast away the detonating fragments and its creator with a blast of his own. Hinata buried a kick in his face, flipped back, and then lunged, unleashing a blistering assault of strikes. The Earl deflected her claws and bounced around a whipping kick, chopping down as he came out of a spin. Hinata flowed around the slash and formed her reiryoku blade. She stabbed, but he caught it with a hand draped in his power before striking with his sword.

She caught it with her free hand - the conflicting cursed energies violently surging and crackling around them. He suddenly rolled to the side as Naruto drove his zanpakuto down where his head had been a fraction earlier.

We're going to have to go bigger, fox. Way bigger.

The Jinchuriki made his familiar hand seal as Hinata zipped after the gray man in a blur of speed. Swinging his broadsword like a bat, he knocked her across the room, embedding her in the wall. She grit her teeth and launched herself out of the crater as the Earl rushed the blonde.

"Taju Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

One thousand clones formed with five tails each. They surrounded the Earl, striking and pummeling every opening. Burning dark matter flowed down his blade and he swung in a wide cleaving arc, the wake destroying any Bunshin within ten feet.

"Senpo." They chorused as body-sized spheres grew in their hands. "Choodama Rasen Tarengan."

The Earl roared and unleashed a beam out of his palm. The spheres struggled, but the blast overpowered them, destroying attack and clone alike. Hinata appeared beneath him, and kicked up hard with both feet, knocking him up into the air. She spun into a crouch as the particles of her vision condensed and brightened.

"Shugohakke Harinezumi."

The Earl brought his sword up behind him, shielding his body from the millions of lightning fast beams emerging from Hinata's ultimate attack. Naruto stuck to the ceiling directly above so she wouldn't strike him as the attack began to churn and shred. Despite the Earl's dark matter infused blade, the light chipped away at it, slowly slicing at the limbs and portions of the his suit not protected by the cursed metal.

Alright Kyubi, do it now!

He formed the reverse rotation and senjutsu shell as the fox poured nine-tails worth of reiryoku into the Shinku Rasengan, increasing the rotation as his wind element merged into it. Hinata's attack faded and his chakra claw rushed out in a curve, catching the Earl in the side and driving him through the opposite wall and out into the open sky. The gray man slashed at the attack and the shell burst.

Naruto dropped the fox cloak so he wasn't sucked in by the void as it instantly expanded into a twenty foot sphere. Landing roughly, he cradled Hinata as the air itself was dragged in, threatening to deliver them to the bottomless maw. He poured reiryoku into the parts of him touching the floor in a desperate attempt to stop sliding toward the ravenous technique as Hinata clung to him.

Please, stop soon. Let this time be different.

Author's Notes:

One thing I do wish I had done more thoroughly with this story was define/expand Aizen as a more complex villain. With both the Earl and Aizen, I wanted to experiment with different approaches. The Earl received a lot of backstory with the flashbacks to flesh him out. Aizen, I tried to do it purely through side comments in his dialogue with others or monologues as a way of revealing it organically. While I like some aspects of doing it that way, I don't think it is enough without some form of exposition. There was also the issue that the Earl was naturally a far more interesting villain for me to write. I do like my reasoning for Aizen's goals, but it lacked the emotional depth I felt with Adam. Aizen was a powerful bad guy with misguided intentions. Adam was the major orchestrator and a reflection of Naruto's struggles, making him a much more personal enemy. Those are my thoughts on it anyway.

I hope I adequately built upon Orihime's plight and decisions. The same goes for Gin and why he did what he did.

How the battle with Sasuke (in terms of what happened within the fight) kind of surprised me when I finished writing it. I'd expected another major brawl, with Naruto weakened going into the battle with the Earl. However, I ended up really liking the entire concept of Naruto's past vs his future being played out in a physical battle, and Naruto being conscious of the fact he'd moved on while still fighting. I felt it gave the fight a uniqueness it otherwise would have lacked.

See you next week.

Legends

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the following and do not claim to. This story is for entertainment purposes only.

Naruto Rend

Chapter 24

Aizen watched in barely disguised shock as the void sphere slowly contracted into nothingness.

"Such an attack could even harm this evolved body of mine. Perhaps, I should deal with them before they recollect themselves."

"You're going to have your hands full with me."

Stained from head to toe in crimson, Ichigo wobbled as his knuckles whitened with his grip on Zangetsu. His inner-hollow had repaired the damage to his body, but with rags making up what was left of his Shihakusho, it was pretty obvious a full recovery was a work in progress. Zangetsu was still working to undo a lifetime of blockades, and honestly, Ichigo told him to wait until the middle of his attack. There was no way to know if his peak power could compete. Getting a sudden boost in the middle of an attack might be enough to catch Aizen off guard and deliver a fatal blow.

We don't have the luxury of not taking every opportunity we scrape up

"Your resilience, mentally and physically, earn my praise, Ichigo Kurosaki. For you to have survived and returned to meet the same result… I would call a lesser man a fool, but you - your actions shall be attributed to misplaced conviction."

"Misplaced, huh?"

"Yes. You fear the change I bring and wish to stop me, leaving things unchanged." Aizen held his hands out in a divine pose. "Fear not, Ichigo. I am a praiseworthy god. After I unmake this you, a new better version will find a home in my universe. Now, lash out in desperation if you must."

That's our invite, Zangetsu!

Ichigo flew forward in air quaking Shunpo as Aizen smiled and his sword moved in the same slow, but instant, motion as earlier. Suddenly, like a dam being broken, unreal amounts of power flooded the Substitute's system and his speed tripled, allowing him to duck under the arm while slicing Aizen from shoulder to hip. Landing in a crouched slide, Ichigo spun with his zanpakuto up as strength returned to his muscles with each breath.

Whoa.

Every second the tingling in his nerves intensified as more energy filled him. Four times, five times, more, with each new moment his reiatsu climbed higher to new levels. They were melding, his Shinigami and zanpakuto powers. He could even feel the hollow blending in as well, ready to unleash its full ferocity the moment he called upon it.

Aizen dabbed at the cut with his fingers, slowly inspecting it like an unfamiliar substance as the wound healed.

"So, I am still capable of doing this. Fascinating."

"I don't think you're as godlike as you want to believe." Ichigo rose to his feet as the Zangetsu's chain jingled. "You're insanely powerful. You have the means to destroy everything, but just because you can put on a good show doesn't make you the real thing."

"You doubt my omnipotence because of a mere scratch? An unintelligent proclamation, brought about by your inability to comprehend what stands before your vision. I shall shatter your

ignorance." He swung two fingers down as heavy energy surrounded the teen. "Hado 90: Kurohitsugi."

Darkness fell over Ichigo as the coffin took shape.

"Saigo no Getsuga Tensho!"

The links of chain dangling from the hilt cracked and fell apart. Black and crimson energy coursed up the blade and wrapped around him in a protective cocoon. His reiatsu exploded with such force it shattered Aizen's spell as the reiryoku grafted itself to Ichigo. His hollow eyes formed as a mask of tattooed bone enveloped the lower half of his face and his orange hair became slightly longer and more unruly. Its sleeves ending at mid-forearm, a tight black jacket solidified around his torso as red highlights ran down its edges, joining with the lines stretching from his revitalized pants. He studied himself as the vestiges of the energy lazily floated around both him and the chainless Zangetsu in his hand.

Yeah, this is a little different than what Ossan had planned.

While still called final, the meaning was completely different than his companion spirit's initial intention. Zangetsu originally meant for final to seal everything up. The true version meant that it was the peak of what Getsuga could accomplish. Completely unchained and empowering each movement, it drew every ounce - every facet - of power within him and combined it into one supremely potent source.

"Bravo, Ichigo." Aizen clapped slowly and stepped closer. "You finally achieve what I always knew you could given your birthright."

"You make it sound like you know all about me."

"I've known about you since the beginning. I have manipulated events knowing what you are now would be the final result." Aizen removed his blade from the crook of his elbow. "You are a being who is the peak of what the current world can produce, and I have waited years for you to reach this point."

"That's nice."

Aizen looked genuinely surprised, maybe even a little disappointed, by his dismissal.

"A strange reaction."

"I'm sure I could come up with a lot of questions, but that altar is starting to really get going." Ichigo held Zangetsu up at an angled guard. "I'll take the history lesson after I protect everyone."

Aizen was behind him in an instant.

Ichigo leapt to the side out into the sky, flying farther from the tower with Aizen in close pursuit.

"How do you propose to protect this world by running away?"

Aizen closed the gap with a sudden burst of speed. Ichigo spun around, the crashing blades generating a shockwave that crushed some of the taller buildings far below.

"I'm not running away." Ichigo pushed harder into the blade lock. "I'm making sure I don't hurt anyone when I go all out."

"Only I may say that about my power. While magnificent, your reiatsu-"

Ichigo swung against the lock, unleashing a wave that dwarfed Aizen and streaked deep into the horizon.

Aizen frowned as the smoke from the wave drifted away. Energy burns and numerous cuts adorned his body as the Kido barrier he conjured fell apart. Ichigo crashed through its remains, striking down with a two handed slash. The false-god blocked as the spiritual metals screeched against each other.

"Ichigo, Kurosaki, do your really believe constantly taking the initiative gives you an advantage?"

Aizen redirected the strike and swung for Ichigo's neck. Reiryoku coated the teen's arm and he blocked the zanpakuto.

"I just really don't want you to start talking again."

Getsuga coated his shin and he buried the leg in Aizen's ribs. The bones buckled for a brief moment until the force sent him soaring across the sky. Sliding on invisible particles of grouped reishi, Aizen found his footing and coughed blood into his hand.

"Do you think one such as I is limited to only Shinigami techniques." Aizen held out his hand as Hogyoku colored energy crackled to life. "Gran Rey Cero!"

Ichigo sped around the hyper-fast blast and swiped twice, the energy binding into a cross shaped projectile.

"Getsuga Jujisho!"

"Fragor."

The reiryoku bomb connected with Ichigo's attack, generating a massive explosion that distorted the space around it and flung them away as the mushroom cloud swelled higher and higher. The Substitute flipped in the air a few times before floating to a stop. Aizen was already there and formed a giant ring of reishi around him.

"Ultrafragor."

The ring imploded, generating an even larger vertical explosion. It drove straight down through the Ark and high into the heavens. The reddish-black of Getsuga ripped the fires apart in thrashing helix before it collected on Zangetsu.

"Getsuga Tensho!"

A crescent five times his height, cut across the gap in an instant, driving Aizen back and up.

He inhaled deeply, taking the moment to rest. His vision struggled to refocus as the ringing in his ears barely let him hear anything. Every nerve had been fried and gone almost numb. Damn it, he could barely feel if he held Zangetsu or not.

My reiatsu took a dive too. I won't be able to handle any more hits like that.

His senses returned well enough to continue and he crossed over the city in an instant. Aizen's chest heaved for a single breath then he lunged. They engaged in a furious rhythm of strikes and blocks, parries of masterful finesse and intricate counters. The blades whistled and shrieked as they sliced through the air as barely visible flickers. Gouges appeared on the taller buildings if they weren't severed outright by the force from their swings.

If this goes on too much longer, one of the others is going to get hurt in the crossfire.

"Are you ready for me to begin trying, Ichigo?"

"No." At point blank range, Ichigo used a Shunpo to tackle Aizen, driving Zangetsu harshly enough through Aizen's chest the blade came out the traitor's back. "I'm ready to end this."

"You presume to defeat your god with a mere stab?" Aizen's face twisted up into an angry scowl. "Such arrogance, boy!" A Hogyoku colored ring encircled them, quickly joined by four more. "A single ring nearly ended your pitiful existence. There will not even be ash left of you with this!"

"You'll die to."

"Again you cannot fathom the realm at which my power rests."

The red outline left the Getsuga as Ichigo's reiatsu peaked. Deep black energy wrapped around him and the blade like smoke as Aizen's rings contracted.

"Ultrafragor!"

"Mugetsu!"

Ichigo tore his zanpakuto straight down through flesh and bone. The air quaked as a the lightless reiryoku welled up beneath Aizen and erupted upwards, darkening the sky as the traitor screamed and the energy continued to shred up around him like magma escaping a vent. The damaged rings detonated, consuming them both as Ichigo's blast surged harder and made the heavens dark as midnight.

He held her for what seemed like hours as the dust and small pebbles settled on and around them. It'd worked, by some miracle, his ultimate technique had come into play and they could live to tell everyone how awesome it was. Because he needed to focus on keeping the shell intact until the very end, last time he couldn't use the reiryoku arm. He'd have to thank the Kyubi for taking over that task.

Who would have thought the fox and I would actually work like partners?

"Is it over?" Hinata mumbled groggily.

"Yeah."

He sat up while supporting her head. Her eyes were half-lidded and a tired smile graced her lips.

"I told you we would make it." She yawned and attempted to sit up, but all color left her face and she nearly went limp. "Sorry, I guess I'm more battered than I thought and that technique still takes everything out of me. I'm not going to be able to stand for a while."

"Then, I'll carry you."

"Naruto-"

"You have been amazing, Hinata. Everything, from your patience to your strength, have been amazing. Please, rest for a little bit and let me carry you this time."

"Such charming words from such a valiant knight."

Naruto's throat constricted and his head snapped around. The last traces of the rubbery suit tumbled to the ground as he stood at the hole in the wall. Even as a human, Naruto would recognize that man. The dark skin, the stubble, the athletic build, they didn't hide what really lurked in the core of the Millennium Earl.

"How the hell did you survive that?"

He wasn't sure how raspy his voice sounded… how shaken. How? There should have been no way anything could survive his final attack. No, that didn't matter. The point was the bastard survived and they were severely limited on options. Hinata couldn't move. The fox was passed out after dumping everything into the void Rasengan. He was okay though. Sure, he was tired, but still in good enough shape he could fight near full strength. Maybe, if his last attack weakened the Earl enough he could take him.

"My charming outer layer and the fully manifested dark matter armor all Noah achieve at full strength, even my sword. You quite literally sucked up almost all of my power, Naruto Uzumaki. All gone."

He made a flitting motion with his hand to demonstrate.

"Naruto-"

"It pains me to see you like that my dear Hinata. And you as well, Naruto, look at the dirt and sweat soaked grime covering you. Like my son, this is the same fate you are doomed to relive if you continue to fight for an ideal that is the complete opposite of human nature."

Naruto summoned a clone. It scooped up Hinata in its arms as he faced Adam.

"Get her out of here."

"Naruto, give me some of the Kyubi's power to recharge."

"I can't."

"But-"

"The fox spent everything in that last attack. Like you, he's going to be out for a little while." Naruto grinned and tightened his Konoha headband. "I'm still feeling pretty bouncy though. What do you say, Earl, or Adam,or whoever you are? Ready for an old fashioned beat down?"

"I have expended the majority of my gift." Adam's eyes narrowed as a faint violet glow traced over his body. "I still have enough to kill you, boy. You may have defeated the Earl, but you now face the leader of the strongest clan the world has ever seen!"

"Go now!" His zanpakuto flicked to his hand. "Mizuchi!"

The vortex of razor wind surged for the last Noah, who held out his hand and encased the zephyr blades in purple energy. Then, he flung them back at their creator.

Genbu.

The kunai flashed and a tortoise shell of tightly compressed atmosphere shielded Naruto from the counterattack. The room trembled as loose stones came crashing down and entire walls started to give.

"Oh, and now the samurai's here!" Adam squeezed his hands and pulled them apart, forming an energy sword. "Looks like today I get to kill everyone who spit on my generosity!"

Naruto leapt and blurred into a Shunshin. His kunai clashed against the Earl's blade. Knocking the arm aside, he stabbed down. Adam spun and brought his elbow over, breaking Naruto's nose. Uzumaki rammed his knee into the side of his head then blocked another swing. Adam punched him in the chest, the empowered hand feeling like a shot of lightning in Naruto's body. The blonde tumbled back, catching his kunai with his teeth as he summoned two shadow clones. Reaching back, they formed a spiraling sphere in each of his hands and went still.

Naruto charged and struck the Earl's weapon. He vaulted over, driving the second one for the back of Adam's head. The Noah titled it to the side, snagged the ninja's arm and flipped him over the shoulder and onto his back as he stabbed down. The senjutsu energy from his dispelled clones collected within him and he punched up, the natural energy manipulated by the principles of Kawazu Kumite, extended the force of the blow, snapping Adam's head back.

He grasped the special kunai.

"Mizuchi."

The Earl leapt away as the attack sailed up and carved out the ceiling. Naruto used a Shunshin and stayed right after Adam. The latter flung his saber, but the blonde dodged. However, the Earl quickly disarmed the zanpakuto from him and punched him in the face. Naruto scowled and connected with his own. He leapt with a spin kick and chased Adam down with a straight kick. The Noah evaded them and kneed him in the gut and united his hands in a large fist, hammering it down on the back of Naruto's skull.

Naruto jumped up, ramming his head into the Earl's face. Grabbing his throat, the ninja continued the motion and slammed Adam against the wall. He slammed a roundhouse kick in the exposed gut then slugged him across the jaw. Adam blocked another punch and sent Naruto flying with a pulse of dark matter that demolished half of the room and everything past the exit. The memories of the clone

carrying Hinata filled his mind as it was destroyed. The last thing it saw was her falling to the ground as the hall way collapsed.

Hinata! No, focus on your enemy. It will take a hell of a lot more than some falling rocks to kill her.

The Jinchuriki righted himself as the second clone in the room dispersed, replenishing his sage energy. He dove for Kyo's physical form, snatching up the kunai and sliding to his feet as a dark matter orb exploded inches behind him.

Because I only learned Mizuchi and Shin, any of Kyo's bigger moves need to come directly from his reiryoku. It takes so much out of him to use it in my body or from the zanpakuto directly that he can maybe do one more.

"Isn't it ironic, Naruto, how our special energies are derived from nature, yet, they are so different?"

"Yours sure doesn't feel like its natural."

"Oh, my will has certainly impacted it - corrupted it if that word makes you feel better. Of course, I think you're beginning to understand how much more effective my version is."

Dark matter flared wildly around him as the air rumbled under his disgusting reiatsu.

"You want to see an effective use of nature?" Naruto held the zanpakuto up. It flashed and his eyes became like Kyo's. "Kouryu."

"Ah, I remember this." Adam's gaze drifted upward. "The final beast that stood above the four gods. Kyo's greatest attack, which called down the solar winds from the heavens to create a terrifying dragon."

The sky split as a golden surge rushed down.

"It couldn't kill me then and it won't kill me-"

The golden dragon tore into him with claw and fang as the wings wrapped around its prey. The energy exploded, disintegrating everything around the Earl as the peerless wind flowed around like wisps of cloud.

It can't beat my best, but damn, I want to learn that.

The atmosphere slowly reconnected as the last of the sage energy left him and his insides felt like they were suddenly on fire. Dropping the kunai from his smoking hand, his legs gave out as he vomited up blood. The dark matter, while no longer strong enough to kill him outright, strengthened Adam's attacks to cause some major internal damage. Blood seeped from the bruises and other spots of marred skin, staining the frayed clothes clinging to him like grafted skin. If he wasn't sure his ribs were powder, he'd probably laugh at how helpless he was.

"I can't even summon a clone to pick me up."

"That's too bad."

Naruto looked up at the unhinged voice.

Entire patches of Adam were missing as his skin continued to burn. The one remaining eye was glazed over in rage as dark matter's hue waxed and waned over his hands.

How can anyone still be alive with so much damage?

Adam kicked away the kunai and clutched Naruto's neck, digging his thumbs into the blonde's windpipe as he strangled him. Naruto struggled to pry the vice-like hands off as the bones in his neck groaned in protest and nails punctured the skin.

"I told you. I told you it would not kill me. You never listened to me, Naruto." Adam shook Naruto so hard the back of his head nearly touched his spine. "I am more than a man. I. Am. Hate!"

Naruto weakly pounded on the arms killing him as everything started growing dark. He landed punches on the chewed face, each no more effective than a small child's. Adam collapsed to his knees, but managed to keep Naruto up enough to glare at him.

"I win you foolish child. Everything will crumble under my hatred as I rain divine punishment on this sinful world! I will become the devil himself! I will-"

A clawed hand burst out of his chest, slicing his heart to ribbons.

"You will rest for all eternity." Hinata panted as her shaking arm supported her outstretched bodyweight and the mangled legs trailed uselessly behind her. "Your long years are over, Millennium Earl."

His hands slid away and Naruto gasped as air filled his aching lungs. Hinata withdrew her hand and collapsed onto her side at the end of the red streaked path she had crawled as Crown Clown dispelled. Adam spasmed once as his mouth quivered like he wanted to speak. Instead, an almost relieved sigh escaped as his dulling eye closed and the dark matter's power disappeared.

Yamamoto watched impassively as the last of the Arrancar burned away in the inferno of his Shikai. When the first wave came to Seireitei, it became obvious Aizen intended for it to merely distract them from the credible threat of the main forces attacking Rukongai and Karakura Town. He knew full well that the human world was in good hands with the team dispatched to it - and should anything have been unfortunate enough to find the bunker shielding the human - Kisuke Urahara's Bankai would have delivered a wretched death.

Instead, he chose to focus his attention on Rukongai, personally leading reinforcements in a charge to exterminate the abominations born of dark matter. They could not allow a single one to escape, lest the tragedy of their existence bring about another calamity.

He sealed his katana back into its cane and surveyed his surroundings.

Many dead lined the streets and ruined buildings - Shinigami and local resident alike. There was not time to mourn and acknowledge their sacrifice. Momo Hinamori's kido bug had ceased moments after Ichigo arrived in Aizen's throne room. Standing over a demonic Espada with nary a scratch provided a great deal of confidence in the teen. However, he was fully aware of Aizen's new power. They could not place everything on the boy alone. Preparations needed to be made in the event Ichigo and the others failed. If the traitor did win, he would do so as a god that crushed the Substitute and the ninja. It would take Ryujin Jakka's Bankai to provide any hope of victory for Soul Society, and such a battle could not take place in any place but enemy territory.

The air given off by the young Hitsugaya as he prepared to leave for the human world eases my heart. He will make a fine commander, which will allow me to unleash my zanpakuto in its full all-consuming fury.

He motioned for a messenger and one immediately landed beside him.

"Have our forces regroup and prepare for a potential second assault. The Thirteenth Division is to mobilize immediately and assist our forces in Karakura Town as planned. Contact Kisuke Urahara and see if he has finally prepared the gate to Aizen's Ark. I will invade the Ark alone."

The messenger hesitated for a moment, but left as instructed.

Are you up to it, old friend? He held his zanpakuto up to his gaze. *Are you prepared to become the heart of the Sun once again?*

Ichigo stumbled into the altar room, using the Shikai form of Zangetsu as a cane. It really sucked trying to keep his head up

enough to see five steps ahead of him. His hair was singed down to a buzz, clearly showing every cut and bruise on his face. His left foot slapped plainly with each step, courtesy of a missing sandal. It matched the rest of him though as every other piece of fabric had become stained scraps, except for barely existing pants.

"Ow." He groaned as his muscles cramped and flayed nerves sent shocks over his raw skin. "Don't fall down. Please, don't fall down."

"Yeah, don't, because I'm not picking you up."

Naruto trudged around the other side with Hinata. They had an arm draped over each other's backs, and Ichigo honestly couldn't discern who was supporting who. Naruto appeared like he'd taken a bath in dark matter and Hinata's legs were obviously barely healed from some major damage.

"You guys look like crap."

"Says the almost naked guy."

"The Earl?"

"Dead. Aizen?"

"The same." Ichigo focused his attention on the altar, particularly the column with a scary resemblance to Orihime. "Is that…"

"It's them."

A lump formed in his throat as Hinata looked at him with a pained expression.

"Ichigo, I used my eyes to see past the stone surface. Their reiatsu is flowing within the altar, but their life signs are-"

"Don't. I understand. So please, it doesn't need to be spoken out loud." He came up close as his eyes welled up and his fist clenched. "I'm sorry I couldn't get to you in time."

Even in stone, she had a soft face - a gentle face. Someone like her never deserved to be brought into a world filled with monsters and bloodshed. She belonged in school surrounded by her friends, doing the goofy crap she always did and eating the weird food combinations that grossed normal people out. She shouldn't be here like this. It shouldn't be her fate. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

It never was.

He wanted to scream, to deny his helplessness. He had so much power now. Why? Why could he not save his friend? Why did it take so long for him to gain the strength necessary to come after her? Why couldn't he find a way to make sure she returned okay, smiling and laughing as their friends welcomed them home?

"Ichigo-"

"I know, Naruto. Even if I hadn't listened to you and came earlier, I wouldn't have been able to win, and right now instead of feeling this gnawing pit in my gut again, I'd be dead and Aizen would have already begun destroying everything. I can't help that I feel like this right now, but I do understand we did the only thing we could do. It's just a lousy way to win."

"Yeah." Naruto's eyes cut down and to the side. "It is."

"Could we use the altar to reverse the process?" Hinata asked.

"We would probably need the Hogyoku, which had bonded so completely with Aizen it turned into dust after his death." Ichigo wiped his eyes dry and took a shuddering breath. "We have to destroy this thing."

"I've already set that up." Shikamaru carried Lee on his shoulders as Shino dragged Starrk and Ulquiorra behind him. "While you guys fought, I laced this entire place with Naruto's custom exploding tags. We're making sure there isn't any way Aizen and the Earl can revive through some hidden apparatus on this Ark."

"Lee encouraged me to save his opponent prior to unconsciousness." Shino lifted Ulquiorra up. "Should I do the same with him?"

Ichigo paused for a moment at the unconscious Arrancar. There was hope the Espada may figure things out someday, and if he became a threat, he'd be stopped easily enough.

"Yeah."

"Hey Ichigo, would you tone down your reiatsu." Shikamaru winced and stepped back. "It's like walking into a wall of angry bees."

So it's like Zangetsu feared.

"This is toned down and I'm injured as well. You guys just need to keep some distance." Ichigo pushed himself to his full height. "I don't know how well you can sense the energy rolling off this thing, but an explosion isn't going to do the job. Someone needs to strike it directly, and I'm guessing it's going to let off a pretty big boom… like instant death boom."

"Ichigo is right." Hinata pushed herself and Naruto straighter. "I can't see a single way to dismantle this safely. What's worse is it is tied to the ark. We have to destroy both at the same time so they don't regenerate the other."

"Like the egg." Shino frowned. "And because the Rikudo Sennin's gate will have closed to protect the other side from the Ark's destruction, the one who stays will have no escape even if they destroy this altar from a distance."

"I'll do it." Ichigo swung his sword over his shoulder. "I'll stay."

"No, this one's on me, Ichigo." The entire room froze as Naruto stepped away from Hinata and smiled at everyone. "I'm the only one with enough reiryoku left and a big enough technique to do it."

"Naruto-"

"This isn't up for discussion." Naruto approached the teen. "You are too powerful and too young to die here. There's always going to be another threat, and as you are now, you can protect a lot of people. You've learned enough to fight smart so I don't have to worry about you anymore."

How is he standing right in front of me so decisively when I can see my reiatsu is hurting him?

"But don't you deserve a chance at a future?" Ichigo squeezed his eyes shut as the words came out as shouts. "You're the one who never got to have the family you always wanted with Hinata. You're the one who saved me when we were complete strangers. You helped me so you wouldn't have to shoulder all the sacrifices and yet you're still taking the bullet! Why… why does it always have to be you?"

"Because, I trust in my friends and my student to do things I could never dream of accomplishing." Naruto placed a battered hand on the teen's shoulder. "You have a huge heart, Ichigo. I am honored to have taught you."

"Damn it."

The first explosion rocked the entire city.

"We can find a better way and come back later." Shikamaru shifted Lee over his back. "This isn't going to happen again."

"I agree." Shino's face struggled to remain unreadable. "Do not do this again.

"There is dark matter in the altar, Shikamaru-san, Shino-kun. It must be destroyed or the Earl might find a way to come back." Hinata tore her pendant free of her necklace. "All of this tragedy ends today. We will make sure it does."

"Hinata?"

"I'm staying, Naruto-kun."

The blonde paused, almost like he was going to argue. Instead, he took the pendant from her and placed his special kunai with it. Naruto handed them to Ichigo.

"Yamamoto will know how to free these guys." A second, closer explosion knocked the loose rubble free. "Don't make my mistake and let things weigh you down, Ichigo. Be better than I was."

Naruto watched them disappear down the stairway as the detonations became more frequent. They'd spent enough time dragging their feet that getting out would be close. He really hoped they did. It'd suck if they all bit it here.

Hey, Kyubi, I can probably scrounge up enough power for a clone. You could escape and the Sennin might be able to build you a new body.

Ha, and crawl around as a common animal like the rest of my pathetic ilk. I will die a horrible death with my power, and pride, intact.

Want to exchange any goodbyes?

I'd prefer my last moments to be more peaceful and less sappy.

Naruto chuckled and moved up close to Hinata.

"Humor isn't what I would expect in a situation like this."

"It's just the fox." He embraced her and she wrapped her arms around his lower back. "I'm not sure how I feel about you staying."

"You were lying about having enough power left. It will take both of us to make a Rasengan capable of destroying the altar." She

squeezed him tighter as the floor rattled like it would come apart at any time. "You never did tell me about that new dream you'd come up with."

"Eh, doesn't really matter now."

"I'd still like to hear it."

"I'll save it for the next life we stumble into… after we probably end up saving that world too."

She giggled softly into his shoulder.

"I love you."

"I love you too." He pulled away and lifted up his hand. "Alright, let's do this!"

Blue reiryoku rotated in his palm as she held her hands over it. He added more power as she took over shaping it and added hers. Larger it grew, until it was almost over a foot in diameter. They nearly toppled over as the left side of the tower gave out and the entire room began to slant.

"I'm really starting to hate towers."

"The final tag is going to go off." Hinata placed one hand on the back of his and used the other to keep the orb in place. "Three… two… one."

They yelled in unison, slamming the Rasengan against the altar and driving it deeper as the final explosion hit. The floor crumbled away as fissures stretched out over the device and light began to shine through. With a final push, the entire sphere plunged into stone and the world was bathed in white.

TWO YEARS LATER

Gaara hugged his sister as the Senkaimon opened up behind him and Rangiku. She waved and headed inside as he stayed behind.

"How are things with you two?" Temari asked as she leaned on her fan.

"Very well."

"You look happy, despite your attempts to hide it."

"I can't have her thinking I'm too happy." He turned with a wave. "Tell Rock Lee he is expected to return directly to Seireitei after his investigation. He just trained with Starrk last month and Karin needs him to watch the baby while she visits an old friend."

"Okay." She snapped her fingers. "Oh, the bum wanted me to ask how you were coming along with those people he rescued."

"Is Kyo giving you trouble again?"

"The man wants his wife out of stasis."

"We are making progress. If he did not want to be patient, he should have remained in the kunai."

"Yeah, Allen tried telling him that. It got ugly."

"Tell them to behave or they won't be allowed to remain outside of Seireitei."

He stepped into the gate and the doors snapped shut behind him. Steadily, he followed Rangiku along the tunnel between worlds. Being able to visit with family was one benefit of the hollows continual entering into the ninja world. The Shinobi were more than capable in most cases, especially after Urahara found a way to create purification tools to protect the balance of souls, but Seireitei liked to keep tabs on them.

"So, we don't have to be back to the office until morning." Rangiku tossed her hair over her shoulder and gave him a sly look. "If we run the entire way, we'd still have the entire evening to ourselves."

"I will have reports to catch up on."

She quirked an eyebrow.

"Really?"

Gaara used a Shunpo to come up beside her for a moment.

"I suppose we will need to move faster then."

Ichigo yawned as yet another colossal hollow challenged him for the title of king. It wasn't like he really wanted it. His companions were the ones that insisted on it. They didn't seem to grasp that while he had hollow in him, most of Hueco Mundo didn't appreciate the Shinigami dominance.

"Die! Shinigami scum!"

Ichigo stopped the titanic fist with a single finger.

"Do you know I get that line at least three times a day?" He flicked his finger, sending the behemoth tumbling backward. He lightly landed on its chest and pointed the sword between its eyes. "Give up."

"Go ahead, slay me with your self-righteous attitude."

"How many times to I have to say this?" He leaned down with an intimidating glare. "If you don't cause problems outside of Hueco Mundo and respect the other hollow who want to be left alone, I won't purify your ass."

"I still question why you bother." Ulquiorra walked up beside the giant's head and sharply tapped it with his fist. "They are not going to

get it. The concept of mercy is foreign to the resident of Hueco Mundo."

"You figured it out - sorta."

"Harribel, Starrk, and the others are waiting to start dinner. Soul Society delivered some of the favorites today." Ulquiorra pocketed his hand. "Kisuke Urahara is here as well, ready to test the next series of repressors."

"Good, maybe we can break the two minute mark this time."

"Rukia Kuchiki is here as well. Perhaps this time, you may explain why, despite a lack of anger, your face flushes when she yells at you."

The sunlight filtered down between the gently swaying leaves. A yawn disturbed him from his daze and he peeked down at the children snuggled up on either side of him.

"When did you three sneak over here?"

"While you were sleeping." The one to his left giggled.

"Obviously. What I mean is-"

A scream echoed throughout the forest. He sprang to his feet and raced around to the front of his house. Armed thugs held a katana up to a young blonde girl's throat as they held her upside down by a single ankle.

Again?

"We know you've got money to have a house that big in outer Rukongai." The first thug spat. "We'll take everything and your food. Oh, and that wife of yours too. She should cooperate."

"You guys do know who I am, who she is, right?"

"We have a hostage." They gestured with the blade. "We'll kill your little girl if you so much as twitch in our direction."

The father sighed.

"Saya, how many times have I told you not to fool around playing captive? Even if they are weaklings, you can still get cut by that sword. I don't want to explain that to your mom."

"Sorry daddy."

"Hey, we're being serious here!"

"Kids. Training time!"

Twenty-six heads popped out of the surrounding bushes and foliage. Saya kicked the man holding her in the face and stole the katana in a single fluid motion. The others leapt out of their spots, pummeling the goons into the dirt. Saya faked a yawn and held the sword up overhead.

"I claim this as candy money!"

The father shook his head in exasperation and walked up the roiling dog pile.

"Speaking of candy, where's your older sister?"

"Samehada went to play with Jugo's animals at his farm. Nel had to go chase after them."

He groaned as the children picked the thugs clean of anything valuable.

"I do not want to have to apologize to Son Goku again."

The soft giggle drew his thoughts away from the irate ape and he faced its origin.

"Is this the sort of life you were expecting when you accomplished your dream, Naruto?"

Hinata walked out of the house with a handful of younger kids in tow. Naruto smiled wide.

"Yep!"

The smaller children took off into the pillaging as Hinata came up to watch along with him. While all the kid's training was coming along really well, both he and Hinata still made sure they could intervene in an instant if something went wrong. Someday, these adopted children of his would go off to Seireitei or begin policing Rukongai, building upon what he and Hinata had started. For now though, he'd be a little overprotective.

"Have I told you how much I love this dream of yours?"

"You have."

When he'd trained in outer Rukongai with Gaara prior to Hell and the final fights with Aizen and the Earl, he saw so many kids homeless… alone. Because everyone was scraping by themselves, no one cared about them. It reminded him so much of the life he led prior to graduating from the Academy when his entire world changed. He'd gotten the idea back then to build a place they could call home - a place of shelter, protection, and love. They could be kids instead of barely surviving, and if they wanted to, they could learn the skills to keep themselves safe.

The one thing he wanted more than anything was a family. So, he decided - with Hinata's blessing - to go to the extreme and make it a huge family. Sure, it had its own unique blend of craziness and trouble, but he'd never felt so content.

"I sometimes wonder if we need to put a leash on that sword."

Hinata laughed into her fist.

"Considering that sword allowed Nel-chan to find us and transform, I think we can deal with a little difficulty. He doesn't actually hurt the tailed beasts."

"The complaining gets old."

They could use the exercise. Yet another reason I am better off remaining a spirit sharing your body.

I know, Kurama. I know.

It'd been nothing shy of a miracle; albeit one specifically directed by the Sennin. His eldest daughter had opened a Garganta directly behind them as the altar began to break down. Already fully transformed into her adult version, she had pulled them far up into the air as Yamamoto appeared beneath them and bathed the explosion in suppressing flames. It'd happened so quickly, they were back within the safety of a new Garganta before he even realized what had happened.

"The bandits are becoming more prevalent. It won't be long until everyone knows where we are - including Seireitei."

"Eh, all our friends know we're alive and want to focus on raising a family for the time being. They'll leave us be if they find out. The old man will probably love the fact so many of these kids wanting to be Shinigami will be trained in teamwork." He scratched at the back of his head. "Besides, we're practically powerless now. Well, back to where we were before gaining companion spirits."

"You know our Zanpakuto have enough power to function if we reclaimed them. We'd be back to full strength in seconds." She leaned up against him. "I personally am in no rush though."

He tilted his head so it rested on top of hers. It didn't need to be said that they would be right back in the fray if needed. There would always be a threat. There would always be someone needing to be protected. Ichigo and the others could handle most of it, but if they

couldn't… well, they were still ninja. That didn't mean they couldn't sneak away for a while - do good in someplace that wasn't tied up in life or death struggles.

The kids hung the thugs from the trees and began sorting out their loot.

"Neither am I, Hinata." He wrapped his arm around her waist. "Because right here, being a part of this craziness, is where I'm supposed to be… and I couldn't be happier."

FIN

Author's Notes:

Considering I started this back in 2011, I never would have thought this story would take me so long to complete. The sensation is multiplied when I realize that I began Asunder in 2009. I didn't think I'd still be playing around in the Naruto universe after so long. While I never considered abandoning Rend, it did get put on the back burner an awful lot and throwing the re-write in there certainly slowed things down.

However, ultimately, I am happy with the finished product. Some will like Asunder better. I personally feel that Rend is superior in terms of pacing, complexity, and base writing. Regardless, thank you to everyone who has been with me since Asunder began all those years ago, and the same to those of you who came in more recently. Thank you for your patience during the hiatuses (both planned and unexpected) and for taking the time to write reviews or message me directly. I also cannot adequately state my gratitude for your support during my dojo's collapse.

While bittersweet, I can say I have completed Naruto's journey as I envisioned it from the beginning. And with it, I have satisfied the idea pool for universes not my own. Sure, I've toyed with the idea of posting a Legend of Zelda fanfic that I wrote way (like 15 years)

back. Being my first novel-length work, it would demonstrate just how far I've grown. But then, I really looked at it and decided no other eyes shall ever witness it, and honestly, the core story is not good enough to justify the time it would take to revise it.

So that means it is time for me to bow out. I'll still haunt this account if anyone wants to see what I'm up to or for new readers with questions. If some of the projects I'm working on do find success (really hoping for a good 2015), I will probably switch Asunder and Rend to a new account since I need the WrathfulSE label to be for original works. I'll let you know ahead of time if/when I do swap.

It's been a great experience, both for growth and enjoyment.

Signing off,

Warj